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**A QUEST FOR IDENTITY: BLACK WOMEN'S STRUGGLE
AGAINST EUROCENTRIC NORMS IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS**

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INTRODUCTION

Since the debut of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970, Toni Morrison has emerged as the face and voice of African American literature, her profound influence and contributions undeniably position her as one of the most significant modern authors addressing African American struggles. Upon receiving the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, Toni Morrison's exceptional talent was officially recognised, affirming what many critics and readers had long known, thanks to her ability to connect with readers from all backgrounds. To this day, the impact of her works remains undeniable and universal, with masterpieces like *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), or *Beloved* (1987) (Harris 1995, 324). Many of these novels focus on the experiences of black women, whose existence is either forgotten or misrepresented by the dominant culture. This marginalisation forces them into a relentless struggle to validate their existence to ensure they do not lose themselves or have to sacrifice their identities in a society that undermines them.

In this essay I will explore how the Western standards imposed by a white-dominated society affect black women in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Tar Baby* (1981). These novels accurately represent the experiences of black women in a society dominated by Eurocentric values and aesthetics, unveiling the extent to which the internalised beauty and cultural norms are imposed upon black women. While some characters, depicted as strong and in touch with their roots, manage to reaffirm their identities and critically examine these white ideals, the female protagonists in *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* reject their black communities and fully embrace Eurocentric views and values, ultimately losing their own identities in the process.

In Chapter 1, I begin by covering Toni Morrison's career, highlighting the importance of her works in the representation of black characters and their experiences. In addition, Morrison's novels encourage readers to question the systems that marginalise and erase black women, contributing to further educate people on the topic of racial discrimination and its causes. In the second section of this chapter, I introduce W.E.B. DuBois' concept of double consciousness, as well as bell hooks' oppositional gaze. These concepts contribute to explore the struggles of marginalised groups, who must reconcile their identity in a society that either rejects or misrepresents them, as well as the importance of self-recognition and critically examining the dominant culture. Ultimately, the analysis of Morrison's novels and characters emphasises the need for an oppositional

gaze to navigate and resist societal pressures effectively, as well as a double consciousness through which to reconcile the dominant culture and one's own identity.

In Chapter 2, I explore the consequences of beauty standards for the female protagonists of *The Bluest Eye*, a novel which explicitly deals with the toxic standards of female beauty and their effects on both girls and women. In this novel, the main characters are confronted with colourism and the upholding of Eurocentric beauty standards within their own community, which ultimately renders them unable to reclaim their own beauty as black women. By examining the experiences and environment of Pecola Breedlove, the story's main character, this chapter remarks on the destructive nature of colourism and the pursuit of white beauty, as well as the societal pressures that enforce these harmful standards.

In the third and final chapter, I examine the negative influence of the Eurocentric culture on black women in *Tar Baby*. The novel portrays a black woman, Jadine Childs, who has abandoned her roots to fully embrace the oppressive standards and insert herself in the white dominant culture, with her journey illustrating the complexities of cultural assimilation and identity loss. This chapter will analyse how Jadine's character represents the dangerous notion that Eurocentric views and aesthetics are more beautiful and more valuable, while natural black looks and traditions must be left behind and disregarded.

Ultimately, my analysis will demonstrate how black women's identities are profoundly impacted by unattainable white beauty standards, as they are continuously underrepresented in the media while Eurocentric canons are idolised. The character of Pecola illustrates how this pursuit of Eurocentric aesthetics and values negatively affects her self-esteem, as she inadvertently associates these white aesthetics with beauty, love and success. The character of Jadine, on the other hand, appears disconnected from the black community, as she has fully embraced the European mindset along with its discriminatory racial ideologies. Through *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*, Morrison highlights the need for a critical approach to these harmful beauty ideals, as the negative representation of black women in the media can hamper their ability to accept their identities.

CHAPTER 1. LIFTING “THE VEIL”

In this chapter I will start by examining Toni Morrison’s career, focusing on the public’s reception and criticism of her novels. Morrison’s work has accurately represented and brought to the forefront numerous systemic issues faced by the black community. Her literature not only illustrates these challenges, but also explores the tools needed to fight oppression on both an individual and a communal level.

To further contribute to the understanding of the struggles depicted by Morrison, the second section will introduce W. E. B. DuBois and bell hooks. These authors focus on the identity problems encountered by black individuals in a society that marginalises them. Their works address the root causes of these identity problems and offer potential solutions, enriching the discussion presented by Morrison’s narratives.

1.1 Toni Morrison’s Literary Trajectory and Reception of Her Works

Morrison’s prolific career has produced many characters and stories by which individuals feel acknowledged and validated, as she accurately portrays the previously underrepresented experiences of black women specifically, along with those of the black community in general. Examining Morrison’s work, Trudier Harris pays homage to Morrison’s characters, artistry, influence and writing style by briefly examining her works up to 1995 along with the different themes found in her novels. Harris highlights the simultaneous mundanity and depth present in Morrison’s characters and scenarios, characteristics which make the novels universal and accessible to any kind of reader: “With brief strokes or extended ones, Morrison gives her characters a linguistic and substantive clarity that makes them linger in the imaginations of her readers” (1995, 325).

Transitioning to another critical perspective, Nancy J. Peterson, in her 1993 essay “Introduction: Canonizing Toni Morrison”, traces Morrison’s literary trajectory by illustrating the varied impact each of her novels has had on the public. With a different focus than Harris, Peterson’s comprehensive examination unveils the evolution of Morrison’s literary career, marked by shifts in reception and critical perspectives. Examining the critical reception of Morrison’s early works, Peterson notes the challenges that Morrison faced with her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) not being as widely acclaimed as its successors would be, and both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* (1973) receiving mixed reviews (1993, 462). Regarding the former, Sara Blackburn of *The New York Times* suggested that Morrison’s debut novel had been received with few negative critiques due

to the rise of the women's movement and a desire among white readers and reviewers to become socially conscious about black women (in McKay 1988, 5). Contrary to Blackburn's negative opinion, in his 1974 review of *Sula* by Jerry Bryant in *Nation* recognises the value of Morrison's early work and the importance of her innovative portrayal of black female characters:

Most of us have been conditioned to expect something else in black characters, especially black female characters—guiltless victims of brutal white men, yearning for a respectable life of middle-class security; whores driven to their profession by impossible conditions; housekeepers exhausted by their work for lazy white women. We do not expect to see a fierceness bordering on the demonic. (1974, 23)

Nellie McKay highlights the turning point in Morrison's career with the 1977 publication of *Song of Solomon*. This novel gained widespread recognition and became a Book of the Month Club selection, the first book by a black author in over thirty years (1988, 4). Despite the success of both this novel and *Tar Baby* in 1981, McKay points out that the varying reception of Morrison's works cannot be solely explained by literary merits, and instead attributes the popularity of *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon* to themes that resonated more with white readers, by having white and male protagonists, respectively.

However, Peterson notes that it was the publication of *Beloved* in 1987 that further elevated Morrison's literary standing, propelling her to the forefront of American letters. The novel received acclaim, awarding her the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Robert F. Kennedy Award (Peterson 1993, 463). Despite its unprecedented success, Morrison's exploration of American slavery in *Beloved* sparked debates, as seen in Stanley Crouch's review in *New Republic*. Crouch criticised her novels for what he deemed as capitalising on the desire of white readers to consume narratives of black women being abused by black men. Regarding *Beloved* specifically, Crouch goes as far as to label the book as a "blackface holocaust novel" (in Peterson 1993, 464).

Despite the negative critiques, Peterson underscores that Morrison's name has become central to debates in American literature, culture, and ideology. Her contributions extend beyond storytelling; she has shaped discussions on multicultural curricula, the interplay of racism, sexism, and classism, and the possibility of constructing literature that is both aesthetically beautiful and politically engaged. Morrison's impact on literature

is seen as groundbreaking, as she created a new form and language to convey African American women's consciousness and experience within a postmodern, capitalist society (Peterson 1993, 465).

While Peterson classifies Morrison's novels according to public acceptance and criticisms, Malin Walther Pereira's 1997 article "Periodizing Toni Morrison's Work from *The Bluest Eye* to *Jazz*: The Importance of *Tar Baby*" examines Morrison's works through the lens of colonialism. For Pereira, Morrison's first four books — *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby*—, collectively constitute her struggle with colonised and decolonised worlds and characters. Pereira emphasises the pivotal role of Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* in understanding the shift in her literary trajectory and the thematic evolution between her early and later works (1997, 72). Despite being considered Morrison's least admired and researched novel (Peterson 1993, 471), Pereira argues that *Tar Baby* has an important place in Morrison's canon due to its exploration of colonisation as a central concern: "Few of us teach it [*Tar Baby*], choosing the shorter, 'woman-oriented' *Sula*, or the richer, male quest patterned *Song of Solomon*, or the current favorite, the cathartic *Beloved*. Yet perhaps *Tar Baby* seems problematic and unsatisfying to many of us precisely because it functions as a transitional text in Morrison" (1997, 72).

Highlighting the significance of this novel, the article suggests that it serves as a transitional text, addressing the concept of double-consciousness and the treatment of beauty, and connecting them to Morrison's earlier works, like *The Bluest Eye*, which Pereira describes as a novel that focuses on "the colonizing effects of white female beauty on a black girl and her community" (1997, 73). Pereira asserts that in *Tar Baby* Morrison shifts her focus from the personal devastation caused by internalised views of beauty, and instead she conducts a broader examination of the cultural costs to the African American community when individuals identify with and fully embrace white cultural values (1997, 75). The article also contends that *Beloved*, published after *Tar Baby*, further departs from Morrison's earlier works by showing a complete disinterest in the colonisation of black female beauty by white ideals. The absence of the beauty issue in *Beloved* supports Pereira's interpretation of Morrison's post-*Tar Baby* work as decolonised (1997, 76). Pereira concludes by recommending that *Tar Baby* should be recognised as a central novel in Morrison's canon, serving as a hinge that highlights the transition between her early "colonised" and later "decolonised" periods. The periodisation of Morrison's work based on her struggle with colonisation sheds light on the differences between her explorations

of beauty, identity, and cultural colonisation in the two distinct phases of her literary career (1997, 78).

Ultimately, since the early stages of her career, Toni Morrison's exceptionally thought-provoking work has sparked debates and encouraged conversations about the intersection between race and gender, as well as their ties to self-perception and identity. By examining Morrison's career, the profound impact of her work in American society becomes undeniable, with works that continue reshaping ideas and influencing contemporary discussions on representation and diversity. Additionally, her representations of black community and interpersonal relations in the society accurately portray the reality of black people, giving them the ability to relate to the characters and their reality. The issue of identity also remains prominent throughout Morrison's work, whether it refers to the reinstatement of black identity against a white-dominated culture or finding one's place in the world through a journey of self-acceptance and self-recognition. Overall, the influence of Morrison's stories does not but encourage readers to further immerse themselves in the journeys of her characters, recounting the complexity of African American experiences within the broader context of American society.

1.2 Double Consciousness and the Oppositional Gaze

The work of W.E.B. DuBois navigates the affirmation of black identity in a world dominated by white images and either inaccurate or inexistent representations of black individuals. In his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois introduces the concept of double consciousness, which, according to the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, is used to describe the internal conflict experienced by African Americans living in a society where they are constantly aware of how they are perceived by others, particularly the dominant white society (Pittman 2023). Through this duality of consciousness, African American individuals become aware of the two conflicting identity groups they belong to, using this knowledge to reaffirm their identities despite the continuous misrepresentation and racial stereotypes that negatively affect their social interactions and their sense of belonging. To highlight the barrier that prevents African Americans from achieving self-consciousness, DuBois introduces the concept of the "veil" and the "second sight":

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness,

but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (2015/1903, 5)

DuBois goes on to explain the desire to keep alive the part of himself that makes him American along with his identity as a black man, as he deems both parts of himself equally important: "In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American" (2015/1903, 5). Through the concept of double-consciousness he thus highlights the complex identity struggles faced by African Americans, advocating for a harmonious integration that preserves their unique cultural heritage while participating in the broader American society.

By mainly focusing on African American men's struggles with this double identity, DuBois' concept does not fully represent the experiences of African American women, whose identities are not doubly but triply divided (Welang 2018, 296). To assimilate and reconcile their existence in a hostile society, African American women do not need a double but a "triple vision", as they stand at the intersection of race and gender (2018, 298). As I will examine in this essay, in Morrison's novels we find examples of women who fall victim to the oppressive society in which they are discriminated against because of both their gender and their race, as well as other female characters whose "veil" is lifted, being able to proudly retain their sense of identity within a community that rejects them. The former, lacking the necessary double consciousness, become susceptible to harmful stereotypes and standards, as they force themselves to fit into a dominant culture which was neither made for them nor will ever accept them.

As we delve into the exploration of societal resistance through the "double vision", bell hooks' essay "The Oppositional Gaze" becomes a crucial lens through which to examine the historical fear, fascination, and defiance inherent in the act of looking for black individuals. Hooks develops the concept of 'the oppositional gaze' as a tool with which she manages to eliminate the "veil" and broaden her self-perception as a black female spectator, truly seeing herself and securing her own identity. Hooks' oppositional gaze thus constitutes a resistance against indoctrination and towards the lifting of

DuBois's "veil" by broadening black women's self-perception so that they can truly see themselves while securing her own identity.

To start her essay, hooks points out that white slaveowners, across all genders and ages, punished enslaved black people for looking, which in turn made the gaze an act of resistance, giving rise to an oppositional gaze—a desire to look that challenged structures of domination (1992, 116). To highlight the active choice that is the gaze and the breakthrough it constitutes, hooks states: "By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.' Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (1992, 116). Hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze played a crucial role in developing critical spectatorship, especially when engaging with mass media that implemented and reproduced white supremacy, such as television and mainstream movies (1992, 117). These white representations that were constantly portrayed as the standard encouraged black individuals to change themselves to attain this Eurocentric ideal. Hooks also notes that this was particularly relevant for black people who did not work in the "white world", and whose only opportunity of gazing upon white people's world unpunished and without shame was through a screen (1992, 117). Addressing this "lack of punishment", she also acknowledges the gendered aspect of looking, highlighting the difference in the experiences of black male and female spectators: "The private realm of television screens or dark theatres could unleash the repressed gaze. There they [black men] could 'look' at white womanhood without a structure of domination overseeing the gaze" (1992, 118).

This intersectionality of race and gender further complicated the cinematic experiences of black women, making them radically different from those of their male counterparts. Black women could finally "look", but into a world in which their bodies were erased or misrepresented, which negatively impacted black women's relationship with cinema "Even when representations of black women were present in film, our bodies and being were there to serve—to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallogentric gaze" (1992, 119). As illustrated by hooks, the cinematic landscape offered no space for authentic representations of black women, and her essay illustrates so through various testimonies of black women that went to the movies, most of whom admitted that "they never went to movies expecting to see compelling representations of black femaleness" (1992, 119); instead, they had to hide their feelings and settle for the erasure of their existence.

As to the public's reception of black female characters in movies, hooks refers to her own essay "Do you remember Sapphire?" and the black women's reaction to the character Sapphire, representing the complexities of black female spectatorship: "She was not us. We laughed with the black men, with the white people. We laughed at this black woman who was not us" (hooks 1992, 120). She highlights how it was only the older black women that felt offended by the treatment of this character, with whom they felt identified, thus resenting the mocking portrayals. Sapphire became a symbol of their anger, an aspect misunderstood by both white viewers and black men: "They resented the way she was mocked. They resented the way these screen images could assault black womanhood, could name us bitches, nags. And in opposition they claimed Sapphire as their own, as the symbol of that angry part of themselves white folks and black men could not even begin to understand" (1992, 120).

In hooks' essay, Sapphire is not the only black female character mentioned to further deepen her thesis, as Toni Morrison's contribution to the portrayal of the black female spectator is also discussed. In Morrison first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison constructs a portrait of the "masochistic look of victimisation" (1992, 121) through Pecola Breedlove and her mother, Pauline, their issues stemming from the negative representation of black women in film and in society. With Toni Morrison's characters, we are shown how this perpetual gaze into the white world, whether it is through a screen or through popular white icons, hurts the societal standards of beauty and further erases the importance and individuality of the black female body. Contrasting with *The Bluest Eye* female characters' negative experience with movies and beauty standards, hooks speaks about her own experience growing in the movies: she emphasises the importance of resisting identification with the oppressive portrayals in films, recounting her own process of unshackling herself from the stereotypes and developing an oppositional gaze (1992, 123). The act of looking becomes then a site of resistance, offering a critical space for black women to navigate the cinematic realm.

Overall, hooks' exploration of the oppositional gaze provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by black female spectators in the cinematic landscape. The intersectionality of race and gender shapes their experiences, making the oppositional gaze a necessity to question and challenge oppressive structures. bell hooks' concept also appears closely related to DuBois' double consciousness, both dealing with the acts of resistance that are necessary to regain agency and self-awareness

in a society in which the dominant culture does not but promote distorted perceptions of blackness.

As mentioned by hooks, in her novels Toni Morrison highlights the importance of these tools for survival and adaptation. Morrison creates many female characters who lack the double vision necessary to secure their identities in a hostile society and are therefore unable to become critical spectators and consumers, getting both themselves and their values lost in the pursuit of Eurocentric ideals.

CHAPTER 2. THE “*THING*”: BEAUTY STANDARDS IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), deals with the concept of beauty and how black females such as Pecola Breedlove, the main character, are unable to find beauty in themselves in a society full of white icons and ruled by white beauty standards. As mentioned by bell hooks, even within the black community individuals cannot help but fall victim to these standards, which harms both their perception of the world and of themselves (1992, 119). Furthermore, while black women struggle to mimic white behaviour and style through consumerism of media and advertised products, black men uphold beauty standards by systematically deeming white women more attractive, despite being themselves victims of oppression and racial discrimination (1992, 118).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison perfectly illustrates what the pursuit of beauty costs black women daily when they must survive in an oppressive society while rejecting their own identity to adapt to that of the oppressor. In her book *The Dilemma of “Double-Consciousness”: Toni Morrison’s Novels*, Denise Heinze dedicates a chapter to the topic of beauty and love in Morrison’s novels, which she titles “The Morrison Aesthetic”. Heinze’s aim throughout this book is to apply the concept of double consciousness to Morrison’s works, as we saw in the previous chapter, by examining the ramifications of beauty standards in her novels. To construct this new “aesthetic”, Heinze argues that black aesthetics cannot be studied separately from white aesthetics. Morrison’s novels perfectly illustrate how the sense of superiority of the latter deploys blackness as “a metaphor for lack, perhaps as a justification for disenfranchising blacks politically or economically” (1993, 15). Morrison thus portrays black aesthetics in perspective, unveiling the systems that keep on diminishing black values, which, although stemming from historic and socio-economic circumstances, are already internalised by both white and black individuals.

The focus of this chapter is black female aesthetics and how they are influenced by white beauty standards in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison’s novels aim to highlight and deconstruct an essential way of thinking which has been embedded in society and which equals physical beauty with goodness: the more beautiful someone is, the more it deserves to be treated well, looked after and cared for. Throughout the novel, several female characters search desperately for this “thing” that can make them beautiful to fit societal standards better and be deserving of love and attention (Yancy 2000, 316). Claudia, the narrator, specifically talks about how, when she was a child, she wanted to dismember a white doll to find out its secret: “I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it

was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (Morrison 2004/1970, 21). The “special” beauty of the doll’s Caucasian characteristics is completely lost to Claudia, as the decision of what is and is not beautiful seems arbitrary to her. Heinze argues that it is because the “origins of that belief system” cannot be explained to her that she cannot accept the doll being considered universally beautiful (1993, 18). Unbeknownst to her, this is Claudia’s first step towards a self-depreciation that stems from colourism, which is present in the black community throughout the novel.

A clear example of this is illustrated through the character of Maureen Peal, a mixed-coloured girl who has lighter skin and eyes than Claudia, her sister Frieda and Pecola. Being deemed more beautiful than the other girls, Claudia recounts how Maureen was given preferential treatment by both children and adults: “When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn’t trip her in the halls; white boys didn’t stone her, white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls’ toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids” (Morrison 2004/1970, 52). Dissecting Maureen in the same way she dismembered the white doll, Claudia and her sister Frieda tried to find flaws in Maureen to break the illusion of perfection that had been created around her, while they experience an unprecedented level of envy and jealousy (Yancy 2000, 316). While the sisters both hate and desire the effect Maureen has on others—contrary to Pecola, who is obsessed with having white features—they lean into hatred and proceed to despise Maureen, even though in her narration Claudia herself admits that Maureen is just the product of the problem and not the problem itself: “If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she was—then we were not. [...] And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made her beautiful, and not us” (Morrison 2004/1970, 60-61).

Quoting Elsie Washington’s article “The Bluest Eye?”, Heinze explains how the desire to possess Caucasian characteristics that have historically been considered prettier and more refined is a widespread trend which not only affects aesthetics, but also contributes to racial superiority by considering black features less appealing (Washington, in Heinze 1993, 20). Not only are female characters such as Maureen Peal “prettier”, but they are also entitled to better treatment, as they are portrayed as helpless and more fragile

than the other girls, thus needing more attention. Maureen Peal therefore represents the “ideal” treatment of a girl in society, popular, privileged, loved and cared for by everyone, while Claudia and Frieda are not but examples of the reality: unimportant, average and overlooked.

Another character towards whom we can see preferential treatment is the white, blonde girl in Pauline Breedlove’s workplace at the Fishers’ house. The unnamed child serves as a contrast between Pauline’s treatment of Pecola, her own daughter, who she herself sees as ugly from the moment she is born, and the treatment toward her employers’ stereotypically pretty daughter. In this case, the unnamed child has the privilege of calling Pauline by the nickname ‘Polly’ and being treated with care and love in exchange, while Pecola and the rest of the family call her Mrs. Breedlove, their relationship being cold and completely lacking maternal affection:

As Pecola puts the laundry bag in the wagon, we can hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and yellow girl:

“Who were they, Polly?”

“Don’t worry none, baby.”

“You gonna make another pie?”

“ ‘Course I will.” “Who were they, Polly?”

“Hush. Don’t worry none,” she whispered, and the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake. (Morrison 2004/1970, 85)

If Maureen represented the ideal place of a black girl in society, provoking Claudia and Frieda’s envy, this child represents the ideal place of a girl in their mother’s heart, causing Pecola to spiral further into her blue-eye madness. It becomes therefore increasingly more understandable that Claudia, Frieda and especially Pecola want to find out the secret to this “honey” in the voices of adults, both present for Maureen and for the unnamed child, and which in the minds of the girls signifies love, affection and importance. In addition, and as a contrast, from the beginning of the story the unimportance of black girls is highlighted: both Claudia and Frieda are barely viewed as people and always regarded last: “Frieda and I were not introduced to him—merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet is here; and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia; watch out for this window; it don’t open all the way” (17).

However, there is a marked difference between Claudia’s familial situation and Pecola’s, as Pecola is not only disregarded but entirely invisible. Although Claudia’s

family is a happy and stable one, the sisters are not used to extra affection or attention either from their parents or from other adults, which leads them to envy Maureen Peal and the attributes that make her special and lovable. For the sisters and Pecola, matching white standards of beauty starts to mean parental affection and societal importance (Cormier-Hamilton 1994, 115). However, unlike the sisters', Pecola's societal circumstances and physical characteristics lead her to become invisible to the eyes of adults, with her broken family system having completely stripped her of her sense of self.

As Patrice Cormier-Hamilton argues, Pecola becomes a victim of a society that sees her as the epitome of ugliness because she does not align with white western standards of beauty (1994, 115). Never having been important to anyone in her life, it is to make herself worthy of love that she starts her pursuit of beauty, which she equals to blue eyes: "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. [...] It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison 2004/1970, 39-40).

Pecola's descent into obsession and ultimately madness can be understood through the evolution of her vision of beauty. While Claudia and Frieda can rationalise their understanding of beauty as they grow, coming to hate its white representations, Pecola's desire to be accepted by both her family and society pushes her to view beauty as an essential need for existence. It is out of this necessity that Pecola finds her first universally liked icons: representations of white girls in candy and media, such as Shirley Temple and Mary Jane (Yancy 2000, 312). The extreme effect of these white icons on Pecola as opposed to their effect on average black girls is clearly represented when she is staying at Claudia and Frieda's house, where they have a Shirley Temple cup. While both sisters admire Shirley's "cuteness", Pecola's inherent desire to become more like her (more beautiful, more liked) leads her to impulsively drink all the milk in the house as an excuse to use the cup:

She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cute Shirley Temple was. [...]

The three of us, Pecola, Frieda, and I, listened to her [Mrs. MacTeer] downstairs in the kitchen fussing about the amount of milk Pecola had drunk. We

knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face. (Morrison 2004/1970, 20-22)

The inclinations of both types of girls are thus perfectly differentiated: contrary to Pecola, the well-adjusted girls can admire and desire beauty while still recognising their own value and without depreciating themselves (Cormier-Hamilton 1994, 121). Claudia and Frieda have a loving, standard family, friends, and a community to rely on, while Pecola has developed a dependence on beauty standards in hope that it would bring her the comfort she needed. Furthermore, throughout the story we can see how any thought Pecola starts to form about accepting herself and finally being happy is tragically crushed by her own reality.

Pecola's development throughout the novel is therefore never hopeful, her mindset being too pre-conditioned from the very start. However, at the beginning of the story, when Pecola is on her way to Mr. Yacobowski's candy store, we see her internal reflection about dandelions, as she wonders why people thought they were ugly when she considered them pretty (Cormier-Hamilton 1994, 122). Pecola's own perception is still salvageable at this point, since she can still see that societal standards of beauty do not necessarily have to be accepted by everyone. Just after this internal monologue comes Pecola's scene inside the store, which Morrison describes in great detail, making it one of the most studied and commented scenes in the book. It also constitutes the only encounter between Pecola and a white man, serving as a contrast between the colourism present in the black community, which Pecola suffers from daily, and the blatant racism and disregard of white people towards black girls in general. The owner of the store, a white immigrant who possesses the so-desired blue eyes, looks at Pecola without really acknowledging her as a person:

He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary. (Morrison 2004/1970, 41)

For Mr. Yacobowski, a white man, Pecola is not ugly or poor, but she is a black girl, so different from him and so below him that his mind cannot really consider her

existence, much less regard her as a human being. In addition, those eyes Pecola so desperately wanted –Mr. Yacobowski’s blue eyes– cannot even see her as worth the glance, making her lesser than the dandelions, not only ugly but insignificant.

After her disheartening interaction with the store owner, Pecola’s somewhat hopeful perception of both dandelions and her own self sinks again: “Outside, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb. Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, “They are ugly. They are weeds” (42). Pecola cannot be pretty, the same way that the dandelions cannot be anything else than weeds, and she understands that the criteria for these standards have already been set beforehand. To leave behind the dilemma that the subjective beauty of dandelions has constituted in her mind, Pecola rapidly resorts to the candy she bought, “Mary Janes”, with the universally loved face of blue-eyed Mary Jane on it (Yancy 2000, 312):

A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named. (Morrison 2004/1970, 43)

This scene becomes another step towards Pecola’s spiral into madness, as she leaves behind critical thinking and gives herself completely to delusion. Her objective of obtaining blue eyes shields her from her reality, and in eating the candy she is one step closer of becoming beautiful, of being acknowledged by people such as Yacobowski (Cormier-Hamilton 1994, 117). To Pecola, Mary Jane’s blue eyes mean that she is deserving of having a candy named after her, and her beauty makes her be loved and seen by everyone.

Yacobowski’s explicit disregard for black girls is evident in the scene, but within the black community we also see many examples of Pecola’s invisibility among adults. The “helplessness” and “fragility” Pecola displays does not but spark hate and disgust among adults, while with prettier children it ignites a desire to help them. This behaviour towards Pecola is illustrated in the last scenes of the book, in which the only adults that see and perceive her helplessness, reacting to it, are Soaphead Church and her own father,

Cholly Breedlove. Pecola's father describes what he feels when he sees her washing dishes in the kitchen: "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child—unburdened—why wasn't she happy?" (Morrison 2004/1970, 121).

Cholly is the first character in which we see the reflection of guilt. Other adults cannot look at Pecola, the same way her father cannot: her misery is accusatory, proof that something has gone terribly wrong (Cormier-Hamilton 1994, 119): "The clear statement of her misery was an accusation" (Morrison 2004/1970, 121). Before sexually abusing his daughter, Cholly's feelings shift between a hatred that "threatened to become vomit" and a "wondering softness", describing his lust as "a tenderness, a protectiveness" (122). Furthermore, at the end of the story, Claudia reflects upon those who loved Pecola, remarking how Cholly must have loved her, as he "was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (155). These conflicting feelings further reflect the complicated image Pecola projects to the world. She dreads being 'invisible', but when individuals do see her, they feel such impotence before her situation that they direct the anger towards her, when they also hate that she and her circumstances have to exist (Yancy 2000, 317). By raping her, Cholly is showing his own frustration and hate of Pecola, a victim of both him and the familial situation he has put her in:

Surrounding all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her—tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear.

[...] Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her. (Morrison 2004/1970, 122-23)

Heinze's reflection upon Cholly's scene highlights the "love" Claudia attributes to him at the end of the novel, as she explains his actions were in "hopes of rescuing her from the dehumanizing glare of all white people and a subsequently loveless existence" (1993, 29). Cholly's mind conflicts his desire to protect Pecola with his own failure as a father, despising her and wanting to care for her simultaneously.

The other man who reacts to Pecola's innocence and helplessness is Soaphead Church, a self-proclaimed "Spiritualist and Psychic Reader" (Morrison 2004/1970, 130) who sees how and why Pecola is an outcast in society. Soaphead is himself a colourist and a paedophile, obsessed with the innocent beauty of little girls as well as with the inherent superiority of his white ancestors. Upon seeing Pecola, Soaphead immediately classifies her as "pitifully unattractive" (130). Pecola asks him for blue eyes, making him the first person Pecola has ever confessed her wish to:

"My eyes."

"What about your eyes?"

"I want them blue."

Soaphead pursed his lips, and let his tongue stroke a gold inlay. He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. (131)

Similarly to Cholly, Soaphead can recognise Pecola's suffering, in this case understanding how it stems from her blackness and her ugliness, and how society treats those with these features. Also, in a similar way to Cholly's scene, Soaphead experiments conflicting emotions regarding Pecola and his being unable to either help her or change the issues that had rendered her helpless:

A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him—money, love, revenge—this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles. (131)

After tricking Pecola into thinking that poisoning a dog would give her blue eyes, Soaphead, like Cholly before him, feels his actions have been an act of mercy and help. Seeing Pecola as an unsalvageable victim of beauty standards, Soaphead considers that she would be safer and happier in her own manufactured reality, in which she has been given blue eyes. In a letter he writes to God, he expresses pride, his actions heroic, for having given hope to a girl otherwise overlooked by everyone, even God himself:

That's why I changed the little black girl's eyes for her, and I didn't touch her; not a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. Not for

pleasure, and not for money. I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show! I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right so to do. (136)

After the dog dies in front of Pecola's eyes, she leaves convinced that her blue eyes will become a reality, and Morrison story goes forward to the public humiliation that is Pecola's incestuous pregnancy, again with people pitying her situation while simultaneously blaming and despising her:

“Well, they ought to take her out of school.”

“Ought to. She carry some of the blame.”

[...]

“She be lucky if it don't live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.”

“Can't help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground”. (140)

Not only does public opinion condemn Cholly and the whole situation, but people also remark how the pregnancy is especially bad as it creates “more ugly”, meaning another child like Pecola: not worth being cared for by neither its family nor its community. Claudia and Frieda notice this lack of compassion towards Pecola, as Claudia narrates that no one was worried about Pecola as an individual. Before, she did not matter, and now only her circumstances do. Pecola, all eyes on her, is thus seen as gossip rather than a victim or even a human being: “They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, ‘Poor little girl,’ or, ‘Poor baby,’ but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils” (140). Individuals in the community that she is a part of, and in which other girls –Claudia, Frieda, Maureen, etc.— are looked after and given a childhood, cannot really see her, as they would see their own failure.

Acknowledging her suffering would make them feel guilty for having built and encouraged the system that actively discriminates against her (LaVon 1990, 777). Did they dare lift their “veils”, they would see that the work that needs to be done to improve her conditions is a collective effort, which they are not willing to make. They would look

at her and see the consequences of their own way of thinking. For Claudia and Frieda, the hatred towards Pecola's unborn baby and Pecola herself clearly stemmed from the colourism and enhancement of white beauty present in their community:

I thought about the baby that everybody wanted dead, and saw it very clearly. It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with great O's of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals (Morrison 2004/1970, 140).

Meanwhile, in Pecola's fabricated reality not only does she have blue eyes, but also an imaginary friend who validates her delusion (Cormier-Hamilton 1994, 121). Through the dialogue with her new friend, we see how Pecola copes with public ostracism as well as the processing of her father's sexual abuse. In Pecola's mind, her pregnancy is substituted with her blue eyes, which make people jealous of her beauty and unable to look at her:

Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off.

Is that why nobody has told you how pretty they are?

Sure it is. Can you imagine? Something like that happening to a person, and nobody but nobody saying anything about it? They all try to pretend they don't see them. Isn't that funny?... I said, isn't that funny? (Morrison 2004/1970, 146)

In this dialogue it is also evident that Pecola is aware of reality, as her imaginary friend's tone denotes irony while reassuring her. Pecola is astonished by the fact that she has been sexually abused by her father and no one in her entourage is either saying anything about it or acknowledging it. However, the shield Pecola has created in her mind to protect herself from trauma is not enough for her, as she subconsciously knows her blue eyes have not made her loved, or even accepted:

Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.

That's just too bad, isn't it?

Please help me look.

No.

But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?

Blue enough for what?

Blue enough for...I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough...for you! (Morrison 2004/1970, 154)

In her delusion, Pecola sets herself a new goal: having the bluest eyes in the world, which would in turn make her deserving of familial and societal love (Yancy 2000, 319).

This collective effort of looking away in Pecola's situation, a girl so innocent she is hated and so representative of society's faults that she becomes invisible, is made by both male and female adults. While the distance and consequent disregard of Yacobowski towards black girls and the disdain of adult black men towards Pecola can be partially understood, Morrison also makes a reflection about black adult women that engage in these harmful ways of thinking. Having been victims of the same glorifications of white beauty in their times, black women have grown up to accept and internalise these standards, accepting the fact that they would never get to see people like themselves portrayed as universal beauty icons (LaVon 1990, 779). Unlike Pecola, her mother Pauline ceases in her attempts to achieve white beauty in her youth, while Geraldine, a mixed woman, can live a quasi-ideal lifestyle which supposedly checks all the boxes.

Pauline Breedlove, coming from a small town, first feels the inadequacy of her looks when she and Cholly move to the city. When recounting her failed marriage, Pauline highlights that most of the fights between her and Cholly stemmed from her needing money to buy makeup and clothes to regain the affirming gaze that she saw in other women (Heinze 1993, 27). Pauline's dangerous obsession with beauty thus serves as a backstory to Pecola's place in her life. By knowing Pauline's origins, we understand that she too was a victim of beauty standards, which meant that Pecola was doomed from the start. Heinze remarks that Pecola's inability to empower herself is not only an issue of public opinion, but also of her mother's acceptance of that way of thinking (1993, 26).

Heinze goes on to explain how Pauline's insecurities lead her to the movies, where she gets to know the impossible beauty standard she is judged by, and, in her frustration, she also starts adopting the perspective of this very gaze that dehumanises her (27). The narrator states that Pauline "was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was

one she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (Morrison 2004/1970, 94). This becomes evident when we see the way Pauline navigates the world: favouring the unnamed white girl in her care over her own daughter, whom Pauline places in the lowest position in the scale of beauty as soon as she is born: “*But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly*” (96). Heinze adds that Pecola’s upbringing was essential, as she lacked strong family figures that could guide and strengthen her through her experiences (1993, 26).

Like her daughter would do in the future, Pauline equates beauty with fitting into the community, in which she stands out for her country ways and her natural look: “The sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way” (Morrison 2004/1970, 92). Feeling like an outcast, and in the same way Pecola does, Pauline finds comfort in obsessing with white icons, consuming movies like *Pecola does candy* (Yancy 2000, 312).

However, Pauline’s newfound happiness in the fictional world of the movies ultimately makes facing reality extremely hard. Pauline’s relationship to beauty is thus further complicated the more she tries to make herself fit into the movies’ standards (Yancy 2000, 312), trying to make the fiction as real to her as possible:

Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. I don’t know. I ‘member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. Well, almost just like. (Morrison 2004/1970, 95)

In addition to her already harmful views of beauty, Pauline learns to equate beauty with canonical representations of romantic love, as seen in the movies: “Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another— physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap” (94).

However, Pauline is forced back into reality after she loses a tooth while eating candy (LaVon 1990, 778). From that moment on, the pursuit of the kind of beauty and love she saw in the movies seems impossible, and Pauline resorts to bitterness and hopelessness: “Everything went then. Look like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly” (Morrison 2004/1970,

95). Both Pecola and Pauline are therefore victims of the white beauty standards they desperately chase to fit in society and attain an ideal love, for Pecola her family's, for Pauline romantic love (Yancy 2000, 314).

As a contrast to Pauline, Morrison presents us with Geraldine, a mixed-raced woman who has achieved what constitutes the ideal place of a black woman in society. Geraldine is described as a sweet and plain brown girl, with manners and homemaking abilities designed to enchant white men (Morrison 2004/1970, 68). However, Morrison makes a point to state that this apparent perfection comes with the downside of its maintenance, which entails blatant colourism and a need to differentiate herself from other black people. When seeing Pecola, Geraldine is reminded of the type of girls she despised and ran away from becoming: poor, dark-skinned girls with whom she had had to share spaces when growing up, despite her being "better" than them in every sense:

She had seen this little girl all of her life. [...] Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. [...] They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato chip dream. [...] They sat in little rows on street curbs, crowded into pews at church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored children; [...] The girls grew up knowing nothing of girdles, and the boys announced their manhood by turning the bills of their caps backward. Grass wouldn't grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down. (74-75)

With Geraldine, we see a sense of superiority reflected not only in physical beauty through white features, but also in cleanliness and neatness, both of the home and of the self. Cormier-Hamilton explains that there was a direct relationship between light skin and economic advantages, as "a black individual's chances of achieving both social and economic advantages is in direct correlation to his/her ability to correspond more closely to the images of beauty and common ideologies of the dominant society" (1994, 115). Conversely, poor black people such as Pecola were considered ugly and their spaces chaotic; for Geraldine the furthest an individual was from whiteness the furthest they were from beauty. Heinze remarks that those who believe in superiority according to skin-color often find themselves more attached to white people, learning to hate their own (1993, 23). Geraldine's idea of perfection involves the containment of the personality and the always keeping of appearances. In a comparable way to Pauline, Geraldine illustrates the consequences of devotion to beauty standards and colourism, with values she also passes

down to her child, Junior: “White kids; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between coloured people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Coloured people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (Morrison 2004/1970, 70).

Contrasting the two mothers, we can see that Pauline had a disadvantaged start, which explains her attempts to achieve beauty through movies as a first step to fit into society and have a fulfilling life. Geraldine, on the other hand, a mixed-raced and more privileged girl, aims and succeeds at achieving white beauty standards through neatness, cleanliness and separation from black community individuals and values. Regarding their children, Geraldine fights to make Junior into what she deems the best version of himself, using his non-chaotic family and his light skin to make him differentiated and superior to other children. Similarly to Maureen Peal, Junior is a mixed-race child who has inherited his mother’s prejudice (Heinze 1993, 23). Conversely, Pecola is the child of a broken home under circumstances that none of the members of the family could escape:

They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique.

[...] You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realised that it came from conviction, their conviction. (Morrison 2004/1970, 34-35)

With a home, a family, and an image that she could not “clean” and make more white-like, Pauline resorts to hating her husband and rejecting her “unfixable” children, in favour of the white, beautiful home and child she takes care of (Yancy 2000, 316). Not being able to make her life beautiful, Pauline immerses herself in the standardly beautiful life of a white family and rejects her own, in a similar fashion to Pecola’s blue-eyed refusal to live in her own reality.

This story is therefore a testimonial of the consequences of beauty standards, marked by whiteness, and their effects on the minds of young black women and girls. Furthermore, the novel highlights how Pecola, the product of toxic standards and poverty, appears invisible to the community that allowed and fostered her circumstances: “Cholly’s and Pauline’s obsession with beauty represents a failure of a man and woman, a marriage, a community, and a society. The novel is an indictment of twisted values and

tangled lives and is Morrison's most blatant and harrowing testimony to the impossibility of love in a world that values looks at the expense of humanity" (Heinze 1993, 29-30).

Overall, *The Bluest Eye* constitutes one of the novels in which we see Toni Morrison's exploration of female beauty, with stories that challenge and denounce the toxicity of conventional white frameworks on beauty. Morrison rejects the white consumer culture's definition of beauty, considering it both racist and superficial, and its effects on black women proving detrimental (Lavon 1990, 783). Through characters like Pecola and Pauline, readers are shown how the internalisation of the white, discriminatory gaze leads to the erasure of black girls' true identities, hindering their growth and development into functional adults. Morrison denounces the colourism present in black communities, and their desperate need for an oppositional gaze through which to challenge the standards and reclaim their own beauty and its representation. With *The Bluest Eye* we see the importance of community values and lack thereof, with a society that turns a blind eye to Pecola's situation and its roots, refusing to see her other than through the same white gaze that discriminates her.

This theme continues in Morrison's later works such as *Tar Baby*, where she further explores the complexities of female beauty and the importance of authenticity.

CHAPTER 3. FINDING IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY IN *TAR BABY*

In her novel *Tar Baby*, published in 1981, Morrison recounts the complicated relationship of different characters with their blackness while immersed in a white-dominated world. With this novel, the author portrays the different ways in which society influences the construction of black identity (Krumholz 2008, 263), transforming and unveiling the underlying structures that favour certain aesthetics and behaviours within the black community. Furthermore, Morrison questions the role of different members of society in supporting and constructing racial ideologies and inequalities, inviting the reader to question their own role in upholding said values (289).

The focus of the story is directed towards two young black people with opposite backgrounds and relationships to blackness and community: on the one hand, Son, outlaw from the minute and tight-knit black community of Eloë, who carries strong traditional values. On the other hand, Jadine, a “yalla” woman that has travelled the world and embodies the concepts of cosmopolitanism and African diaspora (264) with no tangible ties to the black community. In their relationship throughout the novel, Son aims to “save” Jadine from being co-opted by white culture, but his solution lies in her embracing the traditional roles of mother and wife, roles which oppose Jadine’s goals and lifestyle (Everson 1989, 74). We can therefore say that the characters of Jadine and Son represent DuBois’s concept of double consciousness, the former upholding a detached, assimilated outlook in life while the latter embodies traditional, nationalistic values (Krumholz 2008, 264). According to Judylyn Ryan, *Tar Baby* contributes to the concept of double consciousness by highlighting the qualities of both Son and Jadine –community and education, respectively–, while also remarking on their flaws, which ultimately make them incompatible, their realities irreconcilable (1993, 617). Ryan examines how, when faced with the choice, Jadine prefers maintaining her Eurocentric and comfortable lifestyle over reclaiming her roots and acknowledging the history and oppression of her people (614). Jadine thus rejects her own double consciousness repeatedly in the novel, with her European education further alienating her and leaving her unable to understand the experiences of other black people (612).

In *The Dilemma of “Double-Consciousness”: Toni Morrison’s Novels*, Denise Heinze also examines *Tar Baby* through the lens of double consciousness, analysing the influence of western beauty standards and colourism in the novel. Heinze argues that many of Morrison’s mixed female anti-heroines, such as Jadine and Maureen Peal, are not

only made insensitive and unlikable, but also embody “fragile beauty as the norm, qualities of helplessness, chastity, and refinement rather than, say strength, endurance, and intelligence” (1993, 21). These characters serve as a negative contrast to the positive representations of female blackness present in the novel, which in *Tar Baby* would be personified by the woman in the yellow dress and Son.

In this section I will focus on the character of Jadine and her own conflictive relationship to the black community as she is stuck between two worlds: her ancestors’ heritage and Eurocentric values and aesthetics. Through this novel Morrison portrays how Eurocentric culture and values can usurp individuals like Jadine, making them forget their heritage and community (Reyes 1986, 21). Jadine, orphaned at a young age, is raised by her aunt Ondine and uncle Sydney, who work as cook and butler, respectively, for a white family living in the Caribbean. The white couple, Margaret and Valerian, pay for Jadine’s education as well as travel expenses (23), helping her become an international model and finish an art degree, as well as welcoming her in their home as a relative rather than the help’s niece (Krumholz 2008, 266). Jadine naïvely navigates between these areas of her life until Son’s appearance, through whom the consequences of having been blinded by the white dominant culture become evident (267).

Before arriving at the Caribbean island of *Isle des Chèvaliers*, Jadine’s experiences in Europe had led her to question her own relationship to blackness and beauty, thus impelling her to visit Ondine and Sydney—her only black community—to reaffirm her own identity (Hawthorne 1988, 104). Having passed her exams and after receiving several marriage proposals, Jadine is shopping in a French supermarket when she sees an African woman in a yellow dress, whose beauty and uniqueness leave Jadine and the other customers in complete awe. In this instance, Jadine questions her own perceptions of beauty built in the Eurocentric model industry, for which she is not but a palatable, “photographable” and European-like black woman:

Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust. The agency would laugh her out of the lobby, so why was she and everybody else in the store transfixed? The height? The skin like tar against the canary yellow dress? The woman walked down the aisle as though her many-colored sandals were pressing gold tracks on the floor.

[...]

She would deny it now, but along with everybody else in the market, Jadine gasped. Just a little. Just a sudden intake of air. Just a quick snatch of breath before that woman's woman—that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty—took it all away. (Morrison 1981, 42-43)

When leaving the supermarket, the woman in the yellow dress looks directly at Jadine and spits, which Jadine takes as a personal attack, highlighting the fact that she has rejected her roots to embrace Eurocentric values. After this encounter, Jadine's whole perception of Europe shakes, as she questions her own authenticity as well as the treatment of black women in a white-dominated society:

The woman had made her feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic. Perhaps she was overreacting. The woman appeared simply at a time when she had a major decision to make: of the three raucous men, the one she most wanted to marry and who was desperate to marry her was exciting and smart and fun and sexy... so? I guess the person I want to marry is him, but I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl? (43)

The contrasting depiction of Jadine and the African woman she encounters in the supermarket serves to emphasise the novel's ongoing exploration of cultural values and the importance of understanding one's past, with the African woman symbolising ancestral origins (Hawthorne 1988, 103). Jadine's encounter with this woman leads her to realise the artificiality of her own constructed persona, which contrasts sharply with the raw authenticity of the woman in the yellow dress, not suitable for model agencies, white men's marriage proposals, or European beauty standards (Krumholz 2008, 271). Doubting the real intentions behind her multiple marriage proposals upon which she used to take pride, Jadine reflects about her own identity and how she has detached herself from her origins to fit European cultural standards (Everson 1989, 72). Furthermore, the African woman has been able to reconcile her roots and her reality in Europe while maintaining her authenticity, demonstrating a double consciousness which Jadine lacks and envies. Ultimately, this confrontation with the woman in the yellow dress challenges Jadine's self-perception, which finally makes her return to her family, Sydney and Ondine, to re-evaluate herself and her choices (Hawthorne 1988, 103).

To analyse Jadine's evolution in western society we must point to her gradual absorption of the dominating culture. Upon initiating her studies, she defines herself by mimicking the dominant culture's values and rejecting her own, while losing her own

perspective and authenticity in the process (Hawthorne 1988, 103). Furthermore, Jadine's materialism is highlighted in the novel as a sign of complete surrender to the dominant culture and detachment from the black community: "The skin of the baby seals sucked up the dampness of her own. Jadine closed her eyes and imagined the blackness she was sinking into. She lay spread-eagled on the fur, nestling herself into it. It made her tremble. She opened her lips and licked the fur. It made her tremble more" (Morrison 1981, 112). In this scene the seal coat is represented as a source of immense pride and pleasure for Jadine, as material possessions have become extremely important in her life, highlighting her superficiality and lack of core values. Rather than taking pride in and highlighting her origins and uniqueness before an inherently discriminatory society, Jadine subconsciously makes herself fit in, renouncing a part of herself to absorb the values, aesthetics and materialistic ideas of success of the New Euro-American World (Reyes 1986, 21). Throughout the novel, we see the character of Jadine completely displaced, identifying neither with the black community nor with the woman in yellow, and not noticing the black and white role nuances present in society and in her own home, despite her high-quality education and intelligence (24):

Jadine leaned her cheek on her fist. "Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of his genius, not the mask-makers'. I wish it weren't so, but..." She gave a tiny shrug. Little matches of embarrassment burned even now in her face as she thought of all those black art shows mounted two or three times a year in the States. The junior high school sculpture, the illustration-type painting. Eighty percent ludicrous and ten percent derivative to the point of mimicry. (Morrison 1981, 66)

This judgement on Jadine's part reaffirms the fact that she completely embraces European aesthetic criteria, with both traditional black art, represented by the Itumba mask, and traditional black aesthetics, as represented by the yellow-dress woman, being too different and "too much" for the European mind to value (Krumholz 2008, 269). As a black woman with enough white-like features and values to satisfy western ideals and aesthetics, her art degree and cultural education do not allow Jadine to see how race and power are intertwined, thus the clear pattern of her favouring the white oppressor side in every instance. While unaware of this, she keeps undermining black culture and individuals, her character serving as a reminder of the importance of preserving and

upholding black culture and values, as well as recognising the importance of black folklore and identity (Reyes 1986, 19).

Plagued with doubts and confusion, when Jadine flees to the Caribbean she is forced to face Son, a figure which further illustrates her lack of authenticity and connection to the black community (Coleman 1986, 69). Throughout the novel, Son's attitude and ideology present him as a contrast to Jadine, and with his presence the inequities and societal roles of white and black individuals become impossible to ignore. With Son, the other characters can see the racial ideologies, economic inequalities, and historic discrimination that inform the social landscape and promote white cultural dominance (Krumholz 2008, 269).

The structure that had been established before Son's appearance in the house placed Margaret and Valerian at the top, with Jadine being treated like an equal and Ondine and Sydney being treated as friends, the latter differentiating themselves from the native Caribbean workers that helped them in the house (Hawthorne 1988, 106). Jadine's behaviour in the house contributes to the pattern of her being blissfully unaware of her own black identity and its implications, disconnected as she is from the black community. When Jadine says, "It depends on what you want from us", Son replies, "Us? You call yourself 'us'?", to which she retorts, "Of course. I live here" (Morrison 1981, 101).

In several instances throughout the novel, we learn that neither Valerian and Margaret nor Jadine, Ondine and Sydney had tried to learn the names of the native Caribbean workers (Hawthorne 1988, 106) "Yardman", whose real name is Gideon, and Thèrese, whom they called "Mary": "'Or Yardman. Yardman can get some things for you.' 'Who?'" He turned away from the coat. 'Yardman. The gardener.' 'That his name?' 'No.' She smiled, searching for the leashes of the small dark dogs. 'But he answers to it. Which is something, at least. Some people don't have a name of any kind'" (Morrison 1981, 100). In this dialogue the difference between Son and Jadine becomes evident, as Son is the only one that seems to have found calling a man "Yardman" strange, even though both him and Jadine are merely guests in the house (Everson 1989, 68). After this conversation, Son receives help from and befriends Gideon and Thèrese, and it is when they are fired that we see again Jadine's indifference towards them, considering their identities unimportant: "'Too bad Gideon couldn't come.' Son, who seemed to be the only one genuinely enjoying the food, had been silent until then. 'Who?' asked Valerian. 'Gideon. Yardman.' 'His name is Gideon?' asked Jadine. 'What a beautiful name.

Gideon.’ Valerian smiled. ‘Well, at least we knew Mary’s name. Mary,’ said Jadine. ‘Nope,’ said Son. ‘No?’ ‘Thérèse’” (Morrison 1981, 100).

While pursuing Jadine, Son is warned by Gideon about Jadine’s values: “‘Your first yalla?’ he asked. ‘Look out. It’s hard for them not to be white people. Hard, I’m telling you. Most never make it. Some try, but most don’t make it.’ [...] ‘Yallas don’t come to being black natural-like. They have to choose it and most don’t choose it’” (Morrison 1981, 129). In this interaction, Gideon expresses through words what the woman in the yellow dress said by spitting in front of Jadine and what Son himself would find to be true later.

While the distance between Valerian, a wealthy white man, and his Caribbean employees might be understood, the fact that Jadine, Ondine and Sydney consider themselves closer to Valerian than to Gideon and Thèrese strikes the reader as unusual (Hawthorne 1988, 106). It is because of this situation having been deemed normal that Son’s presence disturbs Jadine, making her question her Eurocentric worldview. Through Son the real status quo of the household is thus unveiled, as it becomes clear that Ondine and Sydney are as much subordinates to Valerian as Gideon and Thèrese were, and therefore as much disposable (Hawthorne 1988, 106): “‘I am discussing a domestic problem with my help [Ondine, Sydney].’ ‘Well, they are guests tonight’” (Morrison 1981, 162). When a conflict arises, Ondine and Sydney’s years of service and friendship are left behind as they become “the help”, acting as “guests” just for the night (Everson 1989, 68). However, during these interactions Jadine does not stand for either her aunt and uncle or the fired workers, as she separates herself from them completely, an attitude which Son finds antinatural, as he states in an internal monologue:

And Jadine had defended him [Valerian]. Poured his wine, offered him a helping of this, a dab of that and smiled when she did not have to. Soothed down any disturbance that might fluster him; quieted even the mild objections her own aunt raised, and sat next to him more alive and responsive and attentive than even his own wife was, basking in the cold light that came from one of the killers of the world. Jadine who should know better, who had been to schools and seen some of the world and who ought to know better than any of them because she had been made by them, coached by them and should know by heart the smell of their huge civilized latrines. (Morrison 1981, 164)

Both Son and the yellow-dress woman represent Jadine's alienation in the story, their existence highlighting the white stereotypical beliefs that she has subconsciously absorbed (Krumholz 1008, 271). When confronted with Son, Jadine is reminded of how much they are alike, which in turn angers her while further confirming the yellow-dress woman's silent statement at the French supermarket. Jadine's behaviour is thus considered strange by Son, who has remarked on it since their first interaction, while in turn Jadine uses typically racist insults towards him, such as "ape" and "baboon":

Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?" "White?" She was startled out of fury. "I'm not...you know I'm not white!" "No? Then why don't you settle down and stop acting like it" [...] I am going to kill you. For that alone. Just for that. For pulling that black-woman-white-woman shit on me. [...] A white man thought you were a human being and should be treated like one. He's civilized and made the mistake of thinking you might be too. That's because he didn't smell you. But I did and I know you're an animal because I smell you." "I smell you too," he said. (Morrison 1981, 103)

However, Jadine does not denounce Son's behaviour, as his remarks leave her worried about being more like him than she had previously realised, awakening a sort of race-consciousness inside her that makes her briefly reflect upon the adequate black and white roles present in the house:

She felt a curious embarrassment in the picture of herself telling on a black man to a white man and then watching those red-necked gendarmes zoom him away in a boat. (Morrison: 1981, 106)

[Margaret:] "Oh, God, he scared the shit out of me. He looked like a gorilla!" Jadine's neck prickled at the description. She had volunteered nigger—but not gorilla. "We were all scared, Margaret," she said calmly. "If he'd been white we would still have been scared". (Morrison 1981, 108)

With Jadine, Morrison sheds light on and criticises individuals who are in a privileged position to empower and enhance their communities and their values but instead choose to ignore their roots to uphold their oppressor's culture (Heinze 1993, 22), as Jadine is not at all concerned with race and discrimination until she feels judgement on her behaviour. Overall, Jadine's character represents the negative influence of the white dominant culture on young black women, some of whom succumb to the idea that by rejecting their history and culture to come as close as possible to Eurocentric aesthetics

and behaviours they become more beautiful and more valuable. It is not until Jadine's encounter with the woman in the yellow dress and her relationship with Son that she stops being oblivious to the ramifications of race and power, having previously perceived herself as more "white" than black (Heinze 1993, 22). However, these interactions are not enough to lift the veil before her eyes and jolt her into action, and throughout the novel we continue to see little change in Jadine, who in the end leaves Son and goes back to her previous un-authentic and lavish lifestyle (1993, 22). She is therefore a character comparable to Maureen Peal and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*, with enough privilege to leave behind her culture to assimilate and uphold the western aesthetics, standards and racial ideologies. Ultimately, Jadine cannot acquire the double vision necessary to view herself through a culturally and historically informed perspective (Ryan 1993, 605), making her unable to either recognise the reigning racial ideologies or reconstruct her identity as a black woman with authenticity.

CONCLUSIONS

By analysing Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*, the plight of black women navigating a society dominated by Eurocentric standards emerges as a central theme, revealing the profound consequences of internalising oppressive beauty norms and cultural values. In parallel, DuBois' concept of double consciousness and bell hooks' oppositional gaze provide the critical frameworks for understanding how marginalised groups negotiate their identities within hegemonic structures.

This quest for identity and authenticity amidst societal pressures is depicted through the characters of Pecola and Jadine, whose acceptance of the dominant-culture's values as the ideal prevents them from acquiring the double vision necessary to exist as themselves in a society that rejects them. Pecola's tragic longing for acceptance and validation through Eurocentric beauty standards in *The Bluest Eye* and Jadine's conflicted relationship with her heritage in *Tar Baby* underscore the detrimental effects of internalised racism and the importance of developing critical perspectives to resist dominant cultural narratives.

Through negative representation of black female characters in the media, Pecola and Jadine resort to adoring white icons and assimilating white standards, respectively, both inadvertently rejecting their roots and trying to acquire Eurocentric characteristics. Had they had the tools to develop an oppositional gaze through which to consume and examine Eurocentric media and values, they would have been able to reconcile their identity as both part of the black community and part of the white-focused American society.

Morrison's novels thus force the reader to question the systems that marginalise and erase black women, assigning no aesthetic or social value to those who reject assimilation and reaffirm their identities by critically examining Eurocentric values. Ultimately, Morrison's legacy stands as a testament of the struggle for self-definition and cultural authenticity in the face of systemic oppression, with *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* putting the focus on black women and their representation in a discriminatory society.

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