



Social Hypocrisy of Maureen in the 'Bluest Eye'

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Abstract

The Bluest Eye is the first novel written by Toni Morrison. The novel takes place in Lorain, Ohio (Morrison's hometown), and tells the story of a young African-American girl named Pecola who grew up following the Great Depression. The plot is set in 1941; the story tells that she is consistently regarded as "ugly" due to her mannerisms and dark skin. As a result, she develops an inferiority complex, which fuels her desire for the blue eyes she equates with "whiteness".. Maureen is a light-skinned, green-eyed half-blood African-American girl Pecola's age that is described in the book as a "high yellow dream child" with long brown hair and green eyes. Maureen considers herself to be above dark-skinned African-American people. Frieda and Claudia mock Maureen, calling her "Meringue Pie". This paper focuses on the social hypocrisy of Maureen in the novel.

Confronting the Social Hypocrisy of Maureen in The Bluest Eye Toni Morrison's novel The Bluest Eye explores the darkest depths of human depravity in the face of intersecting race, class and gender discrimination. However, the attribute that renders Morrison's narrative unique is her desire to humanize apparently "bad" or "morally corrupt" characters by tracing their dysfunctions back to the hateful social environments in which they were rendered victims. The character Maureen, a light-skinned black girl, escapes Morrison's empathetic treatment and is one-dimensionally presented as a hypocrite who flaunts the social status gained by her proximity to whiteness. In an interview, Morrison laments she "didn't like [Maureen]" because she fit so perfectly into a stereotype in which "we all know who she is;" Maureen is an

archetypal hypocrite who assuages her subordinated position as a black female by adopting the facade of a superior white (Naylor, 24-25). Sociologist and black activist Patricia H. Collins helps us understand Maureen's position as one in a "matrix" of intersecting oppressions in which people are rendered superior or inferior based on their possession of positive and negative binary traits such as being white over black, male over female, and rich over poor (Collins, 274). Already disadvantaged by her low status as a black female, Maureen represents a strategy of coping with the fundamental contradiction that social and structural injustices continue to thrive within the American promise of equality and freedom (Collins 23). Instead of allowing herself to be victimized by the intersecting oppressions facing her, Maureen hypocritically adopts the interpersonal, institutional and hegemonic viewpoints of her white oppressors. Maureen, as well as the black members of her community, each work together to perpetuate a system of domination by evaluating themselves in relation to the ideal of white, male affluence. Under this racist and sexist ideal, blacks are defined primarily by their social differences and view themselves as incompatible counterparts "related only through their definition as opposites" of whites (Collins, 70). For example, Maureen capitalizes on her socially favored light skin in order to distance herself from Frieda, Claudia and Pecola by calling them "black and ugly" in contrast to her white "cuteness" (Morrison, 73). The fact that Maureen herself is black illustrates the degree to which race is a superficial and inappropriate basis under which to evaluate self worth. Indeed, Maureen is rendered ugly by non-racial standards of beauty, for example possessing a dog tooth and stumps where her sixth digits were removed. What makes her cute is not her actual possession of attractive physical traits, but rather only the socially relegated superiority of light skin in relation to ugly blackness. Collins explains that oppositional binaries such as these are "inherently unstable." That is to say, they must be continually enforced because favored groups desire to secure their otherwise-abstract advantaged positions (Collins, 71). Maureen represents the ultimate internalization of white superiority by assuming the identity of the oppressor and becoming the mouthpiece for racial domination in everyday relationships with other blacks in her community. By asserting a covetous position as a pseudo-white, Maureen inadvertently works to reproduce the interpersonal power relations that incite her desire to deny her heritage.

Maureen's position as a student also reveals the intricacy and degree to which racist hypocrisy invades the structural power systems of institutions such as schools. Morrison details that "when teachers called on [Maureen], they smiled encouragingly," sponsoring her "whiteness" from a position of authority that influences impressionable young blacks (Morrison, 62). The teachers' approval insinuates Maureen even deeper into a social position of acceptance, polarizing most students into Maureen (and by extension, white) worshipers and a handful of few blacks who resisted her hypocrisy (namely, Frieda and Claudia). In this manner, the racial views of teachers and the institutional powers they represent foster "group commonalities that encourage the formation of a group-based, collective standpoint" based on shared interaction

with racist issues (Collins, 24). The teachers help to place Maureen higher inside the network of social hierarchy, much to the witness of envious blacks possessing darker skin. Morrison explains Maureen's social position in intricate detail when she describes that "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..." (Morrison, 62). In this network, Maureen's "whiteness" renders her status almost equal to a white girl and superior to a black girl, while black boys won't discriminate against her as a girl and white boys won't discriminate against her as a black. As a black girl, Maureen represents "a position whereby the inferior half of a series of binaries converge" to occupy the lowest position in social hierarchy. However, her institutionalized approval as a pseudo-white allows her a higher place in racial and gender network of her school (Collins, 72).

In addition to her interpersonal and institutionalized position within social hierarchy, Maureen comes to represent a hegemonic archetype by reinforcing the implicit notion that if blacks were to become more white, they would be better off in society (i.e. face less discrimination, have more power etc.). Morrison doesn't provide Maureen a backstory that allows us to better understand why she is so quick to subordinate fellow blacks, nor is this point as important as the archetypal role she fulfills as a character. "We knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy," Morrison explains through the mouthpiece of Claudia, "the Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us" (Morrison, 74). This "thing" is likely the inescapable hegemonic attitude of white superiority and black inferiority pervasive in the mediums of such as film, school teachings, political ideology and culture (Collins, 284). Omnipresent in society, this almost subconscious racism becomes impossible to pinpoint to any one person or influence as its cause. Consequently, the black social consciousness perpetuates racism simply through the notion that racism cannot be easily identified and thereby examined as harmful. Only Frieda and Claudia have an overt hatred towards Maureen's hypocritical betrayal of her black heritage, and instead of identifying the true reason why they find her unsettling, they search for superficial flaws in her name and body.

Ultimately, Maureen and each of the characters of the novel are left unable to combat or even articulate the network of social hierarchies and values in which they are entangled. For them, racism is such an implicit and inescapable notion that it is an unquestionable part of life that, in its namelessness, becomes even more difficult to combat (Collins, 21-22). Though Collins argues that racism, "by fostering injustice, can also stimulate resistance," Maureen and various other characters are never able to achieve a collective black standpoint from which to combat their discrimination. Left identifying with the white perspective and pervasive racist notions, they lack the education and self inflection necessary to achieve "the power of a free

mind” that questions and deconstructs the ideas, images and ideologies fed to them (Collins, 285). The recognition of a need for self definition is the first critical step in combating racial stereotypes; however, Morrison's characters cannot trace their origins to hegemonic society. Instead, they are left identifying with the very language and terms under which they are objectified.

Works Cited

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