

Is There a Balm In Gilead?

Ten years ago I had the privilege to attend a conference on race relations in the United States and what we as people of faith could do to improve the situation. Maya Angelou stood six feet tall before an audience and addressed one thousand people speaking and singing a somewhat familiar story. Briefly: In sight of his co-workers, a black man made a minor mistake at his job. His white boss humiliated him for it. Ms. Angelou then sang the refrain to the African American Spiritual: "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul" (UMH 375). When the man arrived home, still feeling shame he humiliated his wife in front of his child. The wife, soon after humiliated their son. Later, the shamed child hurt their dog, which then chased after the cat. Following each incident of abuse, she sang in her low, deep, and pained voice, "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole . . . to heal the sin-sick soul." The abuse and shame runs deep when you are subordinate to the dominant culture that keeps Blacks down.

Pecola Breedlove is an 11 year-old child growing up in a black steel mill community in Lorain, Ohio. She is described as ugly, so ugly that she wants to disappear: "Please, God," she said, make me disappear" (Morrison 45). Pecola is on the verge of womanhood and is the center of victimization and abuse in Toni Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye. The Black men, women and children Pecola encounters in this small town, overtly victimize her. But she and the novel's other Black women are, at very least, covertly victimized by the dominant white culture's standard of female beauty in America. To be a beautiful woman, one must be white. I believe this is the primal cause of Pecola's victimization by two of the novel's adult Black women, Pecola's mother Pauline and a light-skinned neighbor, Geraldine. I will argue that these women's deeply embedded need to be white in order to have any value or beauty as a woman

caused them to use Pecola as their scapegoat instead of directing their anger at the white males who sexually and racially objectify women and the white women who are Black women's object of desire and pain. As Maya Angelou's story indicated, there is always someone or something that is more subordinate and less powerful than another. For these female characters, it was Pecola.

The novel opens with a thrice reading from the reader Dick and Jane, which was an early primer used to teach reading to young children across the nation. Its veiled message also taught children what was the acceptable look of the American family and what constitutes success and happiness or what may be called the American dream. The primer's message says that the measuring stick for success is a Dad who works and earns enough to own a lovely home, "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door" (Morrison 3), and the mark of happiness occurs when you have a loving and present "very nice" mother, a "big and strong father," and loving a brother and sisters—the epitome of the "very happy" nuclear American family—who are also very white! It also says by omission that Black Americans are not part of the American dream and cannot achieve this success or happiness. This inherent omission is that there were never people of color or a different family makeup other than two white parents, two well-behaved white children and pets, whose insides were undoubtedly white. The absence of Blacks speaks volumes to the accepted white culture. The message that is being sent to American boys and girls (parents, teachers, librarians, publishers and so on,) is that the white culture is dominant; they will be the ones who are successful, happy, and are able to pursue the American dream, not Black Americans. That Black Americans (and generally all people of color) are unable to pursue and therefore achieve the dream because the American dream was created by and for whites.

Let me explain why I prescribe to this idea and why it is necessary to my argument. The American dream was not actually defined until 1931 by J.T. Adams, it says, “The American dream is that dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought of the world” (qtd. in *American Literature and the Dream*, 5). Adams definition works well for white Americans, but it becomes muddled when it is applied to the Black minority culture. My criticism of the definition lies in the clause, “for all our citizens of every rank.” The position or *rank* (social, political, economical, etc.) of most Black Americans has been historically low, well below whites. Especially noting that Adams put forth this definition in 1931, during the pre-civil rights era which was steeped in inequality and oppression, it seems unimaginable that Black Americans could be included in this dream along with whites since they couldn’t even share the same bathrooms or drinking fountains. Whites were in complete power and control and to have Blacks share in the “better, richer, happier life” would have put their position at risk.

The history of this unsuccessful relationship between the Black and white cultures is nearly 400 years in existence. Since the arrival of the first white-European settlers in the 1620’s seeking “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence penned it, the white man owned the American dream. Black Africans did come to the Americas, but not for the same reasons as the Europeans. They came as cargo through the Middle Passage to be sold as property to the new Americans. Black Americans would become the slaves and labor force of white European immigrants imprisoned in a world of dereliction, vicious enslavement, and oppression by whites. According to Wright:

The Negro slave trade with the Americas was a vast commercial operation that lasted for 300 years, on which great fortunes . . . were founded. Some 15 million black cargoes were shipped. . . They died by the thousands: of disease and filth, foul air, poor food, and broken hearts. . . Those that survived were, on arrival, sold

on the block, to be the absolute property of their owners. Until 1865 they had no protection in law or in any moral code (21).

In spite of the legal end to slavery the oppression continued. “Separate but equal” Jim Crow laws were enforced and remained in effect for another century after the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) until the Supreme Court’s decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) reversed the 1896 Crow laws. It was not until Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights laws into effect in the mid 1960’s that significant changes started to happen. Morrison wrote her novel more than two decades before these laws were in effect. Racism was openly evident and the dominant white culture continued to carry incredible power and control over Blacks.

This contextual historical information concerning the cultural issue of the dominance and control of a subordinate culture strengthens the argument that at least covert victimization of Blacks is inherent in the white cultures vision of the American beauty—that it can only be a white woman. Racism and the concept of the American dream and racism and sexism and the concept of the American beauty parallel one another. Neither is truly attainable to the subordinate black culture since they were created by and for the white culture.

“Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*,” according to Black feminist critic Barbara Christian, “presents a simple theme: the story of a black girl who wants blue eyes as a symbol of beauty and therefore of goodness and happiness” (138). There is nothing simple about Morrison’s novel. In fact, Christian adds, “To consider the theme as simple, undercuts the tragic complexity of such a desire, and complexity is precisely what Morrison is somehow able to impress us with” (138).

Morrison writes in the novel:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sight—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too.

Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes. (46)

Pecola's desire for pretty blue eyes is a statement about several things, for example, race relations between two cultures; relationships within her culture; and the victimization that results from the African American understanding of what it is to be an American beauty and the sexual objectification as a woman. Guerrero enforces this when he states:

Because of [Morrison's] positionality at the intersection between gender and race, her explorations extend beyond the first issue to explore the complexity of "the look" as the controlling gaze of a dominant, racially oppressive society which constructs whiteness as the norm while viewing African American as "Other." Understand from the perspective of a Black woman, the dominant society's gaze, constructed as white and male, is driven by a layering of motivations that express not only sexual objectification but also racism and classism in its operations. (762)

Before Pecola Breedlove was born, the white racist and sexist culture covertly victimized her. Pecola's mother, Pauline was hospitalized and about to give birth to her daughter. "A little old doctor come to examine me. He gloved his hand and put some jelly on it and rammed it up between my legs" (Morrison 124). The Doctor had a group of medical students with him and he commented to them about her, "These women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away with no pain. Just like horses" (124-25). A Black woman to a white man is not worthy of being spoken to like the white mothers to be are or of eye contact, she is not seen, and not acknowledged as a human, instead she is an animal. The trauma of an event such as this is forever internalized in the mind of the Black woman. She is seen and treated as ugly, like an animal. She gives birth to Pecola and while nursing her she thinks, "Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (126). If Pauline believes she is unworthy of human status it is easily understood that she will pass that belief on to her daughter. Always the victimization spirals

down. This is further apparent when Pauline Breedlove names her daughter after a girl in a movie, where she spent so many of her days “collecting self-contempt by the heap” (122). The destructive and abusive symbolism of Pecola’s name makes the opportunity for self-hatred apparent. Maureen Peal, a light skinned classmate of Pecola, explains where her name came from:

“Pecola? Wasn’t that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?”

“I don’t know. What is that?”

“The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother ’cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral.” (67)

Mrs. Breedlove is passing her contempt her self-devaluation and self-contempt onto her daughter who will also internalize it as her mother has. Mrs. Breedlove learned this at the movies “through commercialized fantasies. Alice Walker quotes an article from *The Black Scholar* in which she calls this ‘psychic annihilation,’ letting ‘whites turn blacks on themselves’” (qtd. in Rosenberg 440).

Pecola internalizes the dominant white cultures prevailing image of her, as other Blacks do. Pecola is more physical about taking in the white consumer image of beauty. When Pecola first arrives at the Macteer’s home as a foster child, Claudia Macteer tells the reader, “Frieda brought her . . . some milk in a blue Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” (19). She drinks three quarts of milk from the cup. Mrs. Macteer is ranting, believing that Pecola drank it from greed. Instead she drinks from her need to internalize the whiteness, the whiteness of the milk and the whiteness of drinking from Shirley Temple. Claudia narrates: “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” (23).

Pecola in a similar way finds hope in eating Mary Jane candies as she did when she drank from the Shirley temple cup. With three pennies she enters Mr. Yacobowski's store planning to buy three, three packs of Mary Jane's. According to Madonne M. Miner,

When Pecola enters the store and comes under Mr. Yacobowski's eyes, her existence, as well as the existence of her world, become matters of doubt. Mr. Yacobowski *does not see* her: "These and other inanimate things she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. . . . She owned the crack in the sidewalk . . . she owned the clumps of dandelions. . . . And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her. . . . Male denies presence of female, Pecola cannot defend herself against this denial. (93).

When Pecola looks up at Yacobowski she sees a "total absence of human recognition" (Morrison 48). He does not look at her as one human to another. When Pecola leaves the store she now sees the dandelions and wonders as if about herself if they are weeds or flowers? Observing the white and yellow dandelions—symbolic of white girls with yellow blond hair—she feels affection for them, "but they do not look at her and do not love back," just as white blond haired girls don't. "She thinks, 'they *are* ugly. They *are* weeds'" (50). Pecola angrily refers to the mainstream culture's definition of female beauty—white blond women. For an excellent moment Pecola feels angry. Anger could move her toward a different more active place than to just "fold into herself, like a pleated wing" (73). Had Pecola sustained her anger for more than a moment, she might have been spurred to action and taken control and responsibility for her life. Instead she remains curled up in her shame. Shame is too debilitating for her to do much more than to remember her candy. And so lapsing deeply back into her desire to be a white girl, a girl who would be noticed, loved, and listened to, she removes the wrapper and ingests, internalizes the "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” (50).

Pecola accepts the dominant cultures prescribed consumer image of beauty in the white skinned blue-eyed children on cups and candy wrappers, on billboards and movie screens, or in Dick and Jane readers. Pecola’s fervent prayer is to be a blue-eyed white child who is loved by her parents and not subject to the ugliness of life, the grotesqueness of beatings, rapes, and exclusion. Rosenberg writes so deliberately, “Nothing is more damaging to a dark-skinned girl than such valorization of what she can never be” (Rosenberg 439). Pecola can never be white. Instead she will be victimized by the white man’s prescribed standards of female beauty.

Pauline Breedlove is covertly victimized by the dominant white culture’s image of the American beauty and as a result, overtly abuses her daughter, Pecola. I will focus on a particular incident in which Pauline severely and irreparably hurts her daughter. As we find with Pecola, as hard as Pauline may try, she too will never be able to attain the white man’s definition of female beauty because she will never be white. Walther states, “Throughout The Bluest Eye Morrison presents black women who look at black girls . . . only to reject them in favor of white girls” (779).

The scene takes place at the Fisher’s home where Pauline is employed as a domestic. The incident graphically portrays her choice of the little white blond Fisher child over her own daughter. Not only does Pauline physically hurt Pecola, she emotionally scars her as well. While picking up the Breedlove laundry from her mother, Pecola accidentally knocks the hot blueberry cobbler onto the clean kitchen floor. As a result, Pecola is badly burned by the hot berry juice. Instead of caring for her daughter’s wounds, Pauline embraces the Fisher child who cries in want of another cobbler. Pauline backhands Pecola across the face knocking her on the floor, yanks

her back up and slaps her face again finally screaming to her and her friends Frieda, and Claudia to get out. The final sting comes with the second rejection of Pecola. After the girls leave the house Pecola overhears her mother's honey laden words of comfort as she consoles the girl in pink. Pauline is hushing and soothing the child's tears.

"Who were they Polly?"

"Don't worry none, baby."

"You gonna make another pie?"

"Course I will."

And once again she asks Pauline, "Who were they, Polly?"

And once again she receives no answer, "Hush. Don't worry none" (Morrison 109).

As with Yacobowski, Pecola is deemed invisible. Pauline cannot acknowledge her own child to the little blond girl. If she did, it would only remind Pauline of the unwanted life of squalor, pain, poverty and ugliness she bears. After all, the Breedloves' "ugliness was unique" (38). Pauline and her children "wore their ugliness. . . . You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question" (38-9).

This scene is critical for Pauline and her family. It is a symbol of everything that is **not** the American beauty. Pauline and Pecola are not only Black, they are convicted in their ugliness, almost as if she is worshipping the mysterious master in a life destroying, self loathing and self alienating manner. According to Guerrero, "The 'Mysterious Master' is the dominant, hegemonic ideology which with "the look" as its instrument, devalues [Pauline], assigns her to her social place and correspondingly, to her place in the hierarchy of physical beauty" (763).

“The look” is everywhere, on billboards, movie screens and in the media. Pauline has escaped to the movies to watch the silver screen of beautiful white women. Morrison writes, “[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 123). In addition, the cinema further perpetuates the dominant white culture’s racial underpinnings defining the American beauty.

As the “mysterious Master” clothed Pauline’s family with ugliness, the same Master could bring her healing and wholeness. On the big screen Pauline saw how “the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their crutches” (122). Unfortunately, these miracles were short lived because once she leaves the darkened theatre she enters into the harsh reality of lights and mirrors reflecting her image of blackness and self-proclaimed ugliness, her missing tooth and all. It is then that she knows she will **never** be Hedy Lamar, no matter how she wears her hair. When Pauline becomes aware of Hollywood’s racist and sexist duplicity and abuse she turns to the only person she has power over, Pecola. Pecola becomes the object she thrashes out at. After all, no white man producer will understand that the measure of beauty is something she will never be: white. Therefore, when Pauline is confronted with the choice between her poor ugly Black daughter or the rich pretty white American beauty, she has little choice but to pick the white girl in pink. Thus, Pecola becomes her mother’s scapegoat and the object of her displaced anger, hate, and hopelessness.

Pauline’s reaction to the ruined cobbler, stained floor, and dirty pink dress was to shun her daughter. For Pecola, that was only one more thing that sends her into madness, the utter rejection of her mother. I believe that Pauline’s covert victimization by the dominant white racist

and sexist male brings her to a place so deep in despair that she then, overtly victimizes those with less power. Pecola is the epitome of the least powerful of any of the characters.

Of all the people Pecola has encountered in her short life, no white man, woman, or child, or Black skinned, whether they were light or dark, no one will ever be as scathing and wounding as Geraldine. She overtly victimizes Pecola without mercy. Her concern with the “look,” the scale or measurement of the American beauty is beyond infinity. We meet Geraldine almost as if she is a cameo appearance, on and off the stage in seconds before you can recognize her. She is seen in only one section of the book. She is a powerful force that sweeps through Lorain, Ohio as if a tornado touched down in one’s living room. That is exactly the force that confronted Pecola on the day she is accused of killing Geraldine’s beloved cat, much to the secret delight of Geraldine’s incorrigible son, Louis Jr. It is the day that Geraldine killed the largest piece of Pecola’s miniscule spirit.

There is a psychological piece of jargon, “Act as if _____.” Act as if you are happy and in time you will find happiness and you will believe it. Geraldine is a white acting sugar-brown Mobile girl. She washes with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, slathers her body with Jergens lotion, straightens her hair, and would never imagine a drink or a cigarette touching her lips. Her home and garden are immaculate, decorated with precision; her outdoor dried sheets are ironed before they touch the bed. Everything is in its place and there is a place for everything. Except for one thing, she is unable to give or receive love. Sexually she’s a fake. While her husband makes love to her she might as well be planning next week’s meals. Geraldine cares for her son as she would a new car or a flowerbed. She claims that, “As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them—comfort and satiety” (Morrison 86). More than that she cannot give him. But she can give and receive love and affection and on some level, sexual pleasure

from her cat. “A cat, perhaps, will love her order, precision, and constancy; who will be as clean and quiet as she is” (85). She is remote, separated, and split-off from herself and others.

Geraldine states that, “The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners,” are learned in her house. “In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (83). Samuels and Hudson-Weems state,

“Although Geraldine’s value system provides her with ‘order, precision, and constancy,’ its cost is a stilted, inhibited life, unwarranted cruelty to a young child, derogation, and intraracial tension. Geraldine’s proclivity toward achieving a perfection associated with whites victimizes and scars Pecola: an erupted “Funk” that must be wiped away” (13).

Geraldine states her position clearly, “She has explained to Louis Jr. the difference between colored people and niggers. Colored people were neat and quiet, niggers were dirty and loud” (Morrison 87). There is no doubt that the well-healed lighter skinned Geraldine would never spend her day with a “nigger.” Samuels and Hudson-Weems speak to the victimization of Pecola, “[It] arises not only from the racism and resulting interracial conflicts Pecola must encounter on the way to self-hood but also from the intraracial conflicts related to color, firmly rooted in white racist myths, subscribed to by the Black culture” (12).

One afternoon, Pecola caught unaware by Louis Jr. is enticed into his mother’s—for indeed it is his mother’s home—under the guise of seeing some kittens. When he gets Pecola in the house he throws his mother’s precious cat at her. Louis Jr. locks Pecola in his bedroom with the cat only to realize that Pecola is able to comfort herself and the cat. He then enters the room to see an image of his mother in Pecola’s attention to the cat. This infuriates him and he picks up

the cat by one leg and spins the cat around his head. Pecola grabs Louis Jr.'s arm and the cat is let go in mid air and flies across the room crashing into the window and the radiator before falling still on the floor. At this point Geraldine comes home to find Pecola and Louis and her dead or nearly dead cat. The whole event on Louis' part is totally retaliatory, he wishes that his mother would nurture and love him in the way she does her cat. But Geraldine is beside herself. And this is where the most damaging abuse that Pecola ever receives is inflicted on her. She looked at Pecola and could tell her life story—Geraldine knew immediately what Pecola was, how she lived. She described a person that was counter to her view of “nice neat colored children.” Indeed she saw Pecola as the “nigger.” “Like flies that hovered, like flies they settled and this one settled in her house. Up and over the hump of the cat's back she looked. ‘Get out,’ she said, her voice quiet. ‘You nasty little Black bitch. Get out of my house’” (Morrison 92).

Geraldine's compulsion to be as white as possible and the difficulty that that requires makes her a horrid person. That she has to maintain her superiority to other darker skinned or poorer Blacks, is only so she can elevate herself in the face of the racism she has experienced, because no matter how light skinned or how well put together, the white man and woman are still above her. Geraldine has no choice but to overtly beat down little Pecola because she has been beaten down by the dominant white culture's image of the American beauty—a white woman.

The Bluest Eye is saying more to the reader than Pecola Breedlove was considered an ugly child who was shunned, made fun of, and emotionally, physically, and sexually abused. Pecola also acts as a vehicle to drive the point home that racism and sexism is ever present in Morrison's novel. Morrison's use of the Dick and Jane primer was an excellent means to present the elemental issues of racism and sexism without Morrison saying that white male's dominate the Black culture, indeed all cultures. She doesn't need to say it. Her characters do. Racism is

often both explicit and implicit in its behavior. The Dick and Jane primer is implicit, the KKK explicit. Morrison lets the reader know that racism is behind Black women's victimization and objectification of them. Davis sums it up nicely, "Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects. In this world, light-skinned women feel superior to dark ones, married women to whores, and on and on" (13).

As Maya Angelou's story implied at the opening of this essay, there is always a more dominant victim looking for a more subordinate victim. Pauline and Geraldine overtly victimized Pecola Breedlove because they were covertly victimized by the dominant white culture's standard of the American beauty, a standard they could never achieve because they are not white and indeed **are** Black. I yearn for the day when all women, Black and white will define for themselves their own standard of beauty. That the pecking order of victimization, oppression, and abuse will cease. That will be the time when the balm in Gilead will make the wounded Blacks whole and heal the sin-sick souls of racist, sexist whites.

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