The Views of Whiteness as The Standard Beauty in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to study the way Pecola Breedlove, the main character in *The Bluest Eye*, views whiteness as the standard of beauty, Toni Morrison's historical and social conditions and its correlation to the novel *The Bluest Eye,* and also Toni Morrison’s worldview through the work of *The Bluest eye.* In order to achieve the objective of this research, I use Lucien Goldmann’s theory of *genetic structuralism* to see how it applies in the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. As the methodology, it is a combination between comprehension and explanation. In comprehension part, mental structure of society in the novel is being discussed. While in explanation part, it is the comparation of the mental structure in the novel and society in real life. The findings gained from comprehending the novel is that the way Pecola Breedlove’s obsession of whiteness as the standard of beauty is indeed a result of being pressured by the mental structure of society in the novel regarding the beauty standard. On the other hand, Toni Morrison also encountered the same mental structure of society regarding whiteness as the beauty standard in real life during the writing of *The Bluest Eye*. Hence, Morrison’s worldview that is seen in the novel is related to the perception and acceptance of the environment or the society towards whiteness as the beauty standard. Morrison wants to spread the idea that whiteness is not the standard of beauty.

Keywords: *novel, genetic structuralism, mental structure, worldview, beauty standard*

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Literature is indeed one of the mediums to spread knowledge, whether it is in the form of literature as works of art or literature as any kind of writing with general intellectual distinction. It is also said that the study of everything which are connected with the history of civilization in a certain time is introduced in literature itself (Wellek & Warren, 1966). Wellek and Warren also say in their book, *Theory of Literature*, that “in practice, literature can obviously take the place of many things – of travel or sojourn in foreign lands, of direct experience, vicarious life: and it can be used by the historian as a social document” (Wellek & Warren, 1966, p. 31).

In literature, a study is also considered best when the two core elements, intrinsic and extrinsic elements, are combined (Goldmann, 1980). Lucien Goldmann's theory of genetic structuralism states that literature is a structure that is constructed as a continuous product of a certain social and historical background. To put into the perspective, literary work is not merely fiction but also a medium for its creator to express ideology. This ideology is not born out of nowhere. Rather, it is born as a response to the social phenomenon that becomes the concern of its creator.

Toni Morrison is one of the most compelling American writers. Born in Ohio in 1931, Morrison is seen as one of the feminist writers in the American history. *Song of Solomon* (1977)and *Beloved* (1987) are the two major works which positions Morrison in the world of literature. However, Morrison’s first published novel*,* *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is one of the novels which brought a lot of discussion and close critical attention. The novel locates in Lorain, Ohio, the same place as where Morrison was born. It is important to note that most of her writings concern about women who are discriminated by their gender class and race differences.

Based on the explanation above, in this research, I choose to critically read and study *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison from both the intrinsic and extrinsic elements using Goldmann’s genetic structuralism theory. This theory is chosen because it is deemed to be appropriate in this situation, in a way that this theory does not only focus on the text for its analysis, but also on the historical and social conditions of the work itself. Hence, the objectives of this research are to describe the way Pecola Breedlove views whiteness as the standard of beauty affected by the environment in the story, to describe the way Toni Morrison's historical and social conditions affect the constructs and elements of the text in a major way, and to explain Toni Morrison’s worldview through the work of *The Bluest eye*.

**Methods**

This research is a qualitative-descriptive-research, which discusses the main object of the research based on its fact (Nawawi & Martini, 2005). The primary data of this research were taken from the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, published in 1970. Meanwhile the secondary data of this study were taken from outside sources such as books, journals, and articles that focuses on the discussion and application of Genetic Structuralism Theory by Lucien Goldmann, the socio-cultural construct of whiteness as the standard of beauty, as well as the author’s social and historical background that are deemed relevant to the topic of this research. The data analysis of this research is conducted through the following steps. First, finding the mental structure of the imaginative society in the novel through objective analysis of the work. Second, finding the mental structure of the society in real life through social cultural background analysis, then comparing it with the mental structure of the imaginative society in the novel. Third, finding the worldview that Toni Morrison wants to offer in her book.

**Result**

Summarizing the results, it is necessary to point out that the way Pecola views whiteness as the standard of beauty is affected by the environment in the story. The surrounding of Pecola, the society, and even her own family are mainly the reason of why Pecola insists on having blue eyes. The discriminations from those people are the cause of Pecola’s obsession on the standard beauty of White People.

Pecola's family life is violent and lack of love and support. Her parents fight on a regular basis, and these altercations lead to physical violence. Cholly Breedlove, Pecola’s father, is an abusive alcoholic. While Pecola’s mom, Mrs. Breedlove, does not care about Pecola at all and chooses to work and take care of the baby in white family.

Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking. Tacitly they had agreed not to kill each other. He fought her the way a coward fights a man—with feet, the palms of his hands, and teeth. She, in turn, fought back in a purely feminine way—with frying pans and pokers, and occasionally a flatiron would sail toward his head. They did not talk, groan, or curse during these beatings. There was only the muted sound of falling things, and flesh on unsurprised flesh. *(The Bluest Eye, 1970. chapter 1, p. 43)*

Pecola’s parents always had quarrels in front of their children. It is their routine activity. Every time Cholly went home drunk, the condition in the house turned bad so that quarrels could not be avoided. They had quarrels not only with words but also with hands or any kitchen tools. They often beat each other on a daily basis. Whenever Pecola saw those quarrels, it made Pecola deeply hurt. She was different from her brother who could leave the house whenever he wanted, meanwhile Pecola could only stay there and got hurt inside. By looking at that situation, we can know for sure that Pecola is feeling sick to see the quarrels, Pecola wishes to disappear for she can no longer stand the situation in her family. It looks like Pecola wants to disappear because she does not want to see any quarrels anymore.

There was a difference in the reaction of the children to this battles. Sammy cursed for a while, or left the house, or threw himself into the fray. He was known, by the time he was fourteen, to have run away from home no less that twenty-seven times. Pecola, on the other hand, restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance. Though the methods varied, the pain was as consistent as it was deep. *(The Bluest Eye, 1970. chapter 1, p. 43)*

Pecola continued to receive confirmation of her own sense of her ugliness. She received rejection and was despised not only in her school, but also in society, especially by white people. They did not want to talk to her and they did not even want to touch her. They feel disgusted. When she entered Mr. Yacobowski’s store to buy candy, he gave a distaste and belittle look on her, then he pretended that she was invisible.

At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant store-keeper … his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the fact was possible, not to say desirable or necessary. *(The Bluest Eye, 1970. chapter 1, p. 48)*

Pecola’s rejected experiences does not only come from the Whites, but also from the Blacks, in particular from light-skinned Blacks. Light-skinned Blacks feel that they have a better position or higher status than Blacks because of their skin color that is much lighter than that of Blacks, for they are consumed with the idea of white beauty. This group even consider themselves different from the other Blacks.

Maureen Peal, Pecola’s schoolmate, is a black girl with lighter-skin. She is what people say “a high-yellow dream child” and “they adored her.” Maureen Peal considers herself cuter than the other black girls. She is proud of her skin color because she gets adoration from people and she considers blackness is ugly.

“Black? Who you calling black?”

“You!”

“You think you so cute!”

“I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” *(The Bluest Eye, 1970. chapter 2, p. 73)*

The rejection increases Pecola’s suffering. It is difficult for Pecola to interact with the people who do not offer acceptance. The way they appreciate other depends on how worthy people are seen to be in the eyes of society.

It is clear that the reasons why the white people dislike and reject Pecola is because of her skin color. The Whites consider the Blacks as minorities in both caste and class. The Whites put themselves as a superior race and have the highest status in society. “White people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others are bound to fail” (Wynter, 2002). This make black people feel neglected and that they are nothing in society. It makes them inferior.

Pecola is also surrounded by constant images that perpetuate white beauty standards, including references to the Shirley Temple and images of Mary Jane appearing on her candy wrappers. It appears that Pecola is trying to find the power associated with whiteness. In her attempts to fit in, she develops a destructive craving for blue eyes. In the end, Pecola has an identity crisis when she develops a negative self-concept that she is black and ugly because of the rejection from her parents and society.

The rejection by her parents, her schoolmates, her teachers, and society have made Pecola come to the point that they reject her because she is black and ugly. At this point, blue eyes are really attracted for Pecola, because she knows they will change her life.

For generations, black people are forced to assume an inferior role in order to get along in white society. As it is stated by Richard Dyer that “being white means having a secure position of power” and that “white people have power to create the dominant images and set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others are bound to fail” (Wynter, 2002).

Whites become the symbol of purity, greatness, of the finest, and most successful race in the world. They have the highest status in society. In consequence, Blacks are excluded from the society. The people around Pecola are the people who are affected by the idea of racism. They create a separation between different races. The physical difference between Blacks and Whites causes the different treatments between the people in the novel. Society respects white people only, meanwhile, black people are seen as unworthy. This perception has influenced the life of black people. When the Blacks conforms to Whites society’s standards, they begin to think that the lighter their skin, the better their position and role in society and they also consumed with the idea that white is beautiful and that black is ugly. Through the example below, the writer will explain the standard of beauty seen in society in the novel.

In the novel, Mr. Yacobowski is representing white society, a man who is proud of his status. The way he treats Pecola when she wants to buy candies at his store as if she were invisible and with disgust shows how the Whites treat the Blacks, how racist and discriminating society was toward the Blacks. This shows that white society never want to accept black people.

The life story of Soaphead Church in the novel shows Whites superiority that leads to racism. The Whites are proud of their superiority because of their white strain they are feel better than the blacks.

Moreover, people surrounding Pecola are consumed with popular culture, like Shirley Temple who has white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. The Shirley Temples of the world are adored and cherished by all people, including Pecola. When she stayed at the MacTeers, she takes every opportunity to drink milk from a cup pictured Shirley Temple just to see Shirley’s face. Pecola also admires the picture of Mary Jane candy.

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. 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. … To Pecola they are simply pretty. *(The Bluest Eye, 1970. chapter 1, p. 50)*

The explanation of Shirley Temple and Mary Jane has given the perception of white beauty. Unconsciously, this image has developed Pecola’s self-concept, as she believes that she is black and ugly, while Shirley Temple, who has blue eyes, white skin, and blonde hair, is what people consider to be beautiful and loved.

The Blacks live in the racist and discriminatory white society that on siders white as superior and of high-class status. They find themselves discriminated against in all aspects of life. The discrimination is also come from the culture industry which produced a single standard image of beauty, and that standard insistently excluded them. It is the image of white skin, blonde hair, blue-eyes, and economic privilege. The black people begin to believe the idea that white is most lofty and beautiful, and that black is most degraded and ugly. The Blacks think that the lighter their skin, the better they are in the society’s role. The scale of judgment has been modified to white standards, therefore forcing the Blacks to be judged inadequate. Shirley Temple, who is beautiful, adored and loved by the people, has the characteristic of white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. Shirley Temple has become society’s ideal image.

Adults, older girls, shops, magazine, newspapers, window sign—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. *(The Bluest Eye, 1970. chapter 1, p. 20)*

Based on this, the standards of beauty seen in society in the novel are white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes, which belong to White characteristics. From the explanation above, it can be said that the society where Pecola lives has a mental structure of praising white superiority. The society believes that white is beautiful while black is ugly, so that whiteness becomes the standard of beauty in that society.

The Historical Context of *The Bluest Eye*

*The Bluest Eye* was inspired by a real-life interaction Toni Morrison had with a girl who wanted blue eyes. Her reaction to the girl, which was anger, stayed with her, and later she began to wonder what leads a young girl to desire such a radical transformation. These thoughts led to the writing of *The Bluest Eye.*

The origin of the novel lay in a conversation I had with a childhood friend. We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I “got mad” at her instead.. *(The Bluest Eye, 1970. Foreword, p. X)*

For further information, the socially constructing “whiteness” represented in *The Bluest Eye* has a long historical background. At the very first, it can be done by recalling Kincheloe’s observation that the Irish, Italians, and Jews have all been viewed as non-white in particular places at specific moments in history (Kincheloe, 1999). Back then, Europeans prior to the late 1600s did not use the label, black, to refer to any race of people, Africans included. Only after the racialization of slavery by around 1680 did whiteness and blackness come to represent racial categories.

Another fact about *The Bluest Eye* is that, the novel was written during the height of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s. This movement was a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for Black Americans to gain equal rights under the law in the United States. The Civil War had officially abolished slavery, but it didn’t end discrimination against Black people. They continued to endure the devastating effects of racism, especially in the South (Janken, 2021)

During the Civil Rights movement, another movement emerged, called the “Black is Beautiful Movement.” The Black is Beautiful Movement, aimed to eliminate the idea that black people's natural features, such as skin color, facial features, and hair are inherently ugly.

Black is Beautiful is a cultural movement started in the United States in the 1960s by African-Americans. It then spread beyond the United States, most notably in the writings of Steve Biko’s *Black Awareness Movement* in South Africa. However, while the Black is Beautiful movement began in the 1960s, the struggle for equal rights and a positive perception of African-American bodies began much earlier in American history. Black is Beautiful has its roots in the Négritude movement of the 1930s. This movement was formed because the media and society as a whole had a negative perception that African-American bodies were only fit for slave status (Jackson, 2011).

The movement also encouraged black people to embrace their natural features, and refrain from straightening their hair or attempting to lighten or bleach their skin. Thus, the movement was an effort to counteract the then prominent idea that white people were more beautiful and desirable than black people.

The notion of this movement is clearly reflected by Morrison in her novel, where Pecola, a young African-American girl having a black skin, is obsessed with whiteness as the standard of beauty, and even makes some efforts to look like a white girl so that she can be beautiful like the other white girls in town. In some lines in her foreword in the novel, Morrison wrote:

The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humor ous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze. I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female. *(The Bluest Eye, 1970. Foreword, p. XI)*

**The Worldview of Toni Morrison**

As previously explained before, in order to understand the worldview of the author, we need to understand the mental structure of society in the novel and the mental structure of society in real life. By understanding mental structure from both sides, one can determine the relation between the novel and author’s real world social context, so that the worldview of the author can be interpreted.

From the analysis in the previous chapter, we know that the mental structure of society in the novel is believing that white is beautiful while black is ugly. Pecola, the main character in the novel who is black, has proven that mental structure. In the novel, Pecola was discriminated by other people. Not only from the society, but also her own family. This is all due to the fact that she is black. Since the idea of white is more superior than black has embedded deeply in the mind of society, it makes all the black people in the novel, including Pecola, live a hard life. In the novel, Pecola was ostracized from the society. Other people did not want to be near her and felt disgusted whenever they were together with Pecola. Even Pecola’s mom did not want to be affectionate with Pecola, her own daughter, and prefer to be with her master’s daughter who was white. That is for the reason that she thinks Pecola is ugly, since she also believes that white is more beautiful than black. With that mindset, the beauty standard that is seen in the novel is primarily white skin and blue eyes, which belong to white characteristics. We can see it through Pecola’s point of view, who is a victimized girl who is obsessed by whiteness and longs to have blue eyes. She really wants to have blue eyes due to her being harassed by other people for being black. She truly believes that once she gets those blue eyes, her life will be better and her own family will look out for her more.

On the other hand, in accordance with the mental structure of society in the novel, the mental structure of society in real life is also the same. As previously explained, the society in real life also share the same mental structure as the society in the novel, which is the superiority of white people that is creating the mindset that white is beautiful while black is ugly. As in real life, Toni Morrison as the author of the novel discovered the racial beauty experience with her childhood friend. Morrison’s friend, a black girl, wanted to have blue eyes. The encounter with that friend makes Morrison thinks on the reason of her friend’s desire to have blue eyes while being black, since blue eye is not the characteristic of black people. Along with the writing of *The Bluest Eye*, there was Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s. This movement was a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for Black Americans to gain equal rights under the law in the United States. Even the civil war had abolished slavery, but the discrimination against Black people still continued. Black people still had to endure the horrible effects of racism, and it included the reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties which then creating the mental structure of the society into believing that white is beautiful while black is ugly.

By comparing the mental structure of society in the novel and the mental structure of society in real life, we can know the worldview of the author. Toni Morrison, as the author of the novel *The Bluest Eye*, has her own worldview that she wants to share through her work. The worldview that is seen in the novel is related to the perception and acceptance of the environment or the society towards white culture and its impact on African-Americans. Hence, through her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison hopes she can contribute to society to promote critical thinking and thoughtful reflection, not only on literature but also on the impact of racism and gender-based constructs of beauty in society. Along with the correlation of mental structure about the beliefs of white is beautiful and black is ugly in both society in the novel and real life, Morrison, with her worldview, wants to criticize these beliefs and broaden the perception of people regarding the beauty standard, since the discrimination that is started with people’s skin color can caused a horrible impact on people of color especially on Black people.

**Conclusion**

The first thing that can be concluded in this research is that Pecola is obsessed with blue eyes. She sees whiteness as the standard of beauty since she herself witnesses that everyone always praises the beauty of white people while degrades people on color especially black people. The second conclusion from this research is that Toni Morrison’s historical and social condition have an effect on how Morrison writes her novel, *The Bluest eye.* During the time Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*, there were a lot of racial problems in the society. Racial problems in social interactions become the cause of social distancing and separation between black and white population groups. The last thing that can be concluded is this research is about the worldview of the author. The worldview that is shown by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* is related to the perception and acceptance of the society towards white culture and its impact on African-Americans. Morrison shows the dynamics of whiteness superiority and the standards of beauty in society, especially on black people in her novel *The Bluest Eye* which. So, through her novel, she wants to spread the idea that whiteness is not the standard of beauty.

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