The Bluest Eye

*By Toni Morrison*

An Analysis by Laufey Sverrsidóttir

Toni Morrison, christened by the name of Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison was a critically acclaimed African American author, she came to be one of the most celebrated authors in the world with her writing of the *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved, Zula* and more. She was awarded the Pulitzer price and the medal of freedom from President Barack Obama. She was the first African American woman to win the Noble price for literature. With all these accomplishments she paved the way for multiple minority writers; women, people of colour and anyone who was familiar with hardship. She served as inspiration to the likes of Oprah Winfrey and Maya Angelou.

My personal favourite book by Toni Morrison is *Tar baby*, it was the first book I read by her, and it sincerely catapulted me into African American literature and began my accession into the world of racial injustice. The book is a masterpiece of literary poetry, and boarders on being considered magical realism, a literary style originating from Latin America, where reality is often described in a magical way or magical elements find their way into everyday life.

However, it is not the book I will be discussing, the book I will be discussing is her first book, *bluest eye,* which in my opinion serves as a beautiful tale, yet still a commentary on oppression and gender expectations. The two feminist theories that most inspired me to pick this book are intersectionality and beauty politics.

The manifestation of the prior in the book is in the interplay between gender and race, a state of intersectionality with which I have no personal experience, however the latter I can personally relate to, although in a drastically different way.

The bluest eye is a poetic piece of literature that, at times is so creative that it is a hard read. It is in a way a puzzle that only clicks into place in the last chapter, you read the last sentences and you think to yourself, “huh….wow” perhaps that was the experience of someone unfamiliar with the subject and demographic. I was 19 when I read it, a properly formed feminist but somewhat new to the topic of intersectionality. I’ve had almost 5 years to ponder and wonder.

The bluest eye follows the life of two girls, Pecola and Claudia. Pecola is in a way the protagonist of the story however she is observed by Claudia, and for the most part the story is narrated by Claudia. Claudia, and her sister Frida become friends with Pecola after the latter is taken in by the sisters’ parents whilst they are ‘outdoors’. They are three black girls growing up in a white world. Pecola and Frieda both share a love for Shirly Temple, but Claudia hates her, she despises the world the doll belongs to, the world that tells little black girls that blond curls and baby blue eyes are the most valued traits, and therefore they are of no value.

Throughout the book we come to understand the Pecola has lived a life of suffering. She might have been the inspiration for the character of Celie from the Colour purple. Her father rapes her and she’s all her life considered ugly. Pecola however meets a much more tragic end, just as creative as Morrison is, she’s also a realist. A critical turning point in Pecola’s story happens when a magical healer comes to town. Pecola, desperate to attain any value in this world, goes to him and asks the healer to make her eyes blue, he takes pity on the poor black girl and tells her if she performs a task for him her eyes will turn blue. Pecola preforms the task, and as her mental health is slowly deteriorating, she believes that her eyes have changed. Around the same time that this happens we learn that her father has impregnated her. Claudia and Frida beg God to let the baby live, but it is born prematurely and dies. Pecola starts losing her senses more and more, she ends up wandering the streets, talking to no one in particular about her blue eyes, her blue eyes, her not blue enough blue eyes.

The intersectionality in the story is blatantly obvious. The women of the story are treated one way because they are black and treated worse because they are women. The crimes committed against them by black males are terrifying and the messages they receive from the outside world about their value even more so.

Beauty politics and pretty privilege are feminist theories that revolve around how women are treated differently based in their looks and how women are lead to believe that a big determining factor of their worth is ‘what you look like’ all women are affected by this in one way or another, those who already have desirable traits are made to fight tooth and nail to maintain them, whilst those who don’t are reminded everyday that they are worth less and should strive to be like the other.

This book had a profound affect on me, I read Sula and Tar baby around the same time, and it was the first time I’d ever been so blatantly introduced to the lives of African American women. Feminism was only feminism before that. The feminist element in the story of desirability and pretty privilege, is what I identify most with, although compared with Pecola on the other side, I’m no Angelina Jolie but I’ve benefitted enough from pretty-privilege to not turn a blind eye to my desirability. But just as Pecola believed she wasn’t enough, I will probably never think so either, that is the plight of desirability, there’s always something to improve. I am very aware of my privilege as a white, good-looking, healthy woman. However capitalistic society will never let me think that I am enough. One of my favourite passages from the book, perfectly encapsulates the exact system that has been put in place to make women feel like this.

*“All of us--all who knew her--felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on  
her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity  
decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her  
awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us  
believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams  
we used--to silence our own nightmares.”*

Among the many tools used by patriarchy to make women feel like they are of less worth, pinning them against each other might be the cruellest one. Making us believe that there is not space for all of us, that we are in fact our own greatest enemy. When in reality, the day that every woman fights for another, that will be the day, the day that the patriarchy falls.