Eye Motifs as Symbols of Judgement in *The Bluest Eye* and *Citizen*

It is often proclaimed that eyes are windows into the soul. This belief has persisted since antiquity. The ancient Greeks effusively discussed glaukopis, a property of the goddess Athena’s eyes tied closely to her intelligence. Historians have labored over wondering what this truly meant: blue eyes, green eyes even grey. Whatever the original meaning, all we can ascertain is the bestowed association with cunning. Modern psychology has elucidated the importance of eyes in human interaction. Humans unconsciously read each other’s emotions through their eyes. For example, as an instinctive reflex, people furrow their brows when sad or worried causing in the eye to look smaller. In contrast, raising one’s eyebrow when happy enlarges the eye’s appearance hence the term bright-eyed. Moreover, it is the lack of crow’s feet that help to belie a false smile. Thus, through our power of vision, we strive to discern another’s feelings and intentions through their eyes. At some level, communication is not merely human to human but eye to eye. Eyes become the literal focal point of human interaction. Thus, in some sort of instinctual synecdoche, the eye becomes a physical manifestation of an individual. We see that eyes serve a dual purpose; they are both the subject and the object: the judge and the judged. It is through eyes that we judge the character of other. Therefore through the motif of human eyes, we can explore the conscious and unconscious judgments made towards African Americans and their subsequent effects.

Because eyes are a corporeal representation of a human soul, it is only natural that the physical characteristics of eyes morph into expressions of a person’s character. This intertwining of the physical with the personal is a bedrock component of racial dynamics in society. The interplay of race and presumed character in explored in *The Bluest* Eye by Toni Morrison. In *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. In her novel, Morrison paints a picture of the life of a black family the Breedlove’s in Ohio in the 1940s. In particular, Pecola Breedlove is obsessed with obtaining blue eyes. “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 46). Pecola’s desire to have blue eyes is a desire to be free from societal judgement. Simply by being black, Pecola’s every action is judged within the context of her race. This silent evaluation occurs throughout novel as Pecola is called ugly because of the color of her skin. Moreover, blue eyes serve as tangible symbol for the judgement of a white upper class; like the eyes of God, the blue eyes are a visceral representation of the harsh gaze of white society. Thus, acquiring blue eyes would not merely allow Pecola to be an equal unmarked citizen. It enables her to be the judge and see the world in a different way. Morrison’s use of eyes to symbolize the domineering gaze of white society adds depth to Pecola’s obsession.

The color blue is also significant. Through references to Gene Harlow and Shirley Temple, Morrison suggests that blue eyes reflect the societal worship of white beauty. In this sense, blue symbolizes the supposed innocence and purity of white society. In her lyric essay *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine broadens the symbol of blue eyes from a localized eye to an all-encompassing blue light. Rankine notes that “You exhaust yourself looking into the blue light. All day blue burrows the atmosphere. What doesn’t belong with you won’t be seen. You could build a world out of need or you could hold everything black and see” (Rankine 80). Here Rankine seeks to explore the more abstract forms of racial tension. Conjuring up the idea of open blue sky, the blue light reflects the American dream, parts of which are unattainable for black people. Calling this ethereal blue a form of light highlights its overpowering nature that “burrows the atmosphere”. Like our eyes are always drawn to the light like moths to a flame, so too are minds drawn to symbols of white beauty. Thus, Pecola is one many black youths who exhaust themselves looking into the blue light. Like blue eyes, the blue light represents the penetrating gaze of white society and a image of beauty that excludes African Americans. Noting that under the gaze of the blue light, what does not belong will not be seen, Rankine argues that the overpowering stare of white society does not accept information about black people that contradicts their predetermined beliefs. Moreover, Rankine’s usage of blue light as a symbol is nothing must an abstracted and dehumanized take on Morrison’s blue eyes. The blue light is the cold judgment of white society and the unattainable heights of white beauty and the American dream.

In some cases, the face of judgement metastasizes from raw antipathy to simple indifference and neglect. Society has seen so much that it simply chooses not to see any more. This is observed when Pecola interacts with Mr. Yacobowski. “He urges his eyes out of his thoughts to encounter her. Blue eyes. . . . Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover . . . . 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 storekeeper . . . see a little black girl?” (Morrison 48). In this passage, Yacobowski is described as seeing right through Pecola. By focusing on his eyes, Morrison is using Yacobowski as an avatar for white society at large. Yacobowski’s blue eyes are indeed the blue eyes are indeed the cold blue light of judgement that Rankine mentions. The manner in which his blue eyes penetrate Pecola demonstrates the way whites perceive blacks as worthless, not acknowledging. Moreover, the inability of Pecola to communicate with Yacobowski highlights the gulf a black girl and a white man. Their difference in eyes is reflective of their difference in viewpoints. As a white immigrant, Yacobowski is unable to comprehend how Pecola sees the world. Rankine too fixates on the ways in which blacks are denied acknowledgment by whites. In one encounter, Rankine describes how a white man cuts in front of her in line by not noticing her. Again the blue eyes of white society stare right through black Americans, deeming them not fit for acknowledgment.

The imagery of blue eyes and blue light works to personify white society. This works because we attach so much of our feelings of humanity to eyes. Thus, it makes sense that through an image of bloodshot eyes, Rankine conjures a visceral image of black Americans. Rankine describes “On the tip of a tongue one note following another is another path, another dawn where the pink sky is the bloodshot of struck, of sleepless, of sorry, of senseless, shush” (Rankine 107). The bloodshot eyes symbolize the inherent tiredness and perceived lack of respectability of black Americans. The pink sky like the blue light is a broadening of the image of eyes bringing to mind the reddened whites of eyes. Whereas the blue light before embodied a white America, the pink sky stands in opposition. The eyes are tired after years of straining to see. Just like Pecola believes that getting blue eyes will change the world she sees around herself, bloodshot eyes arise from glaring hard at the world in hopes of changing it. Moreover, Rankine goes on to note that a black body is an injured body. Thus, the bloodshot eyes are merely a symptom of a larger problem. In addition, to illustrating the damaged quality to African Americans, bloodshot eyes act to display the negative judgement cast towards them. Recalling visuals of drugs and alcohol, the bloodshot eyes are a manifestation of the social unacceptability and negative stereotypes cast upon African Americans. Just as blue eyes stand for the purity and innocence of whites, bloodshot eyes bring to mind the corruption associated with blacks. Therefore, the bloodshot eyes are a mirror image of the blue eyes. Once again the duality of human eyes with regards to human judgement presents itself. The bloodshot eyes are both the eyes of black Americans as they try to see a better world and also the judgement cast down from society.

In the works of Morrison and Rankine, eyes serve a dual role. They are both judge and the judged. For instance, Morrison uses the imagery of blue eyes to personify the supposed purity and innocence of white society. These blue eyes representing the idolizing way blacks like Pecola view and judge white society. Pecola’s yearning for blue eyes serve to display her overall worship of white beauty. On the other hand, the blue eyes of Mr. Yacobowski exemplifies the dual role, the stark judgement of white society onto blacks. This is expanded upon by Rankine’s blue light which overpowers the identity of African Americans. Just like how blue light cannot nourish plants, the blue light of white society serves only to blind black Americans. Through Mr. Yacobowski’s refusal to acknowledge Pecola, we see how this blue light of white society deems blacks as not worth caring about. Inverse to the blue eyes are Rankine’s blood shot eyes. Just as the blue eyes illustrate the cleanliness of whites, the bloodshot eyes convey the tired and broken nature of blacks. The eyes are bloodshot from staring too hard hoping to see a better world. The bloodshot eyes are the judgement of blacks upon society analogously to how the blue eyes are the judgement of whites upon society. Moreover, in a perfect symmetry, the bloodshot eyes symbolize the negative stereotypes about blacks the same way that blue eyes encapsulate the positive stereotypes about whites. It is through ultimately through our eyes that we are seen as well as see.