

Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder

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Course: English 300

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Assignment: Literary Analysis

In the movie, *Little Miss Sunshine*, a young girl, Olive, who has little physical beauty or actual talent, enters a beauty contest in Southern California. She receives encouragement from her mother and her grandfather, and even though the beauty contest ends in failure it is inconsequential to the little girl, because through the eyes of her family she knows her beauty. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison introduces the reader to a little African-American girl from Ohio named Pecola Breedlove. One of the first things the reader learns is that Pecola is a homely girl from a homely family. By telling Pecola's story, Morrison addresses the themes of beauty and ugliness from within the African-American experience. *The Bluest Eye* reveals the absolute destruction on a young human psyche when it perceives only ugliness and never beauty reflected in the eyes of others. The human person thrives on social interactions, beginning with the family, and then the broader community. Through these interactions, the person discovers not only her identity, but also her inherent beauty. Examining the impact of sustained negativity on Pecola Breedlove and comparing this to the character of Olive from *Little Miss Sunshine*, will show how life truly depends on the affirmation of beauty.

Pecola first learns her unsightliness from her family. In the beginning of the novel, Morrison draws attention to the collective unattractiveness which is the unique characteristic of the Breedlove family (Morrison 38). Both physically and morally unappealing, the Breedlove family received their ugliness from their own conviction. Morrison writes:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. 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.

(39)

Pauline and Cholly, Pecola's parents, learned their ugliness from their own family situations as well as through racial discrimination. In this atmosphere of low self-worth, the baby Pecola learns of her lack of appeal from her mother. Morrison describes the first impressions that Pauline had of her infant girl. She writes, "A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds...But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (Morrison 126). Over time, such an attitude will chip away at the self-confidence of a young girl.

In *Little Miss Sunshine*, Olive's father makes a comment that chips away at her self-confidence. Olive, who is preparing for a beauty contest, reaches for a bowl of ice cream, only to be discouraged by her father, who tells her that people in beauty pageants do not usually eat ice cream. The viewer watches the excitement and anticipation as the treat melts in front of the young girl's face. Though this incident is not as extreme as Pecola's situation, it shows the crucial role parents play. Cholly Breedlove fails miserably. He compounds his wife's opinion of their daughter through his disdain and inadequacy as a father and finally through raping Pecola. In the scene where Morrison describes the rape, she gives his reaction to his daughter, writing, "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence" (Morrison 161). Pecola's unattractive appearance may disgust Cholly, but it also draws him to her, leading him to make her life even uglier through rape and her subsequent pregnancy.

Pecola wears her perceived physical inadequacy as a cloak of shame. Desperate to disappear, she longs for what to her comprises the apex of beauty, blue eyes. Morrison offers a number of telling insights into the heart of little Pecola. She reveals that each member of the family experiences ugliness uniquely, but Pecola gives it expression through the desire to disappear. She whispers into the palm of her hand, "Please, God, please make me disappear" (Morrison 45). Only eleven-years-old, she finds her own existence too painful to bear. Her sense of personal unworthiness finds confirmation in the cruelty of racial disdain in her town of Lorain, Ohio. She cannot even go to the candy store without encountering this hatred expressed as indifference to her being. Morrison describes the reaction of a store owner to the little girl: "As 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" (Morrison 48). Pecola succumbs to shame at his reaction, as if there were something wrong with her because of the way he sees or fails to see her.

Olive, however, does not allow the negative reaction of others to bother her. She does not even seem to notice the lack of approval from the audience due to her botched performance during the beauty pageant. Her inner sense of security is in contrast to Pecola, who longs to be deemed beautiful in the eyes of others and who finds the secret to this beauty in blue eyes. Her desire for blue eyes leads her to the local spiritualist, who obtains them for her, but the resulting effect is hideous and destructive rather than beautiful (Morrison 204). Pecola emerges as a victim of her own desires and the cruelty of others, who, blinded by their own ugliness, cannot see the beauty in her life.

Morrison concludes *The Bluest Eye* by remarking on the phenomenon that some people make themselves feel more secure by preying on those they deem weaker than themselves. She

implies that true ugliness may consist in the lack of goodness in a person (Morrison 205). The healthy growth of young children requires that they be affirmed in their beauty and this calls for a certain level of maturity in the adult community. The affirmation does not merely consist in physical beauty. In the case of Olive from *Little Miss Sunshine*, her mom and grandpa not only affirmed her beauty but also her ability as a dancer and singer and encouraged her to develop these gifts. Her family approves of her, and thus she is able to weather the disapproval of society. Pecola Breedlove possessed features that could be deemed beautiful, such as her hair, but no one saw them, preoccupied as they were with white American standards of beauty and with making themselves feel better. When she did obtain a stereotypically beautiful feature, blue eyes, it ruined her. Authentic beauty finds its source in truth, and in this instance that truth lies in accepting the reality of one's existence. If one is an African-American, one's beauty lies in developing those gifts and features that render the African race unique and beautiful. It may take a long time, however, for society to see with these eyes.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. The Bluest Eye. New York: Random House, 1998.

Little Miss Sunshine. Dir. Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. Screenplay Michael Arndt. Perf.

Greg Kinnear, Steve Carrell, Toni Collette, Paul Dano, Abigail Breslin, and Alan Arkin.
Big Beach Films, 2006.

Dr. Bouton's Comments: *Alexandra's essay, "Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder," juxtaposes an important novel, Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, with a contemporary film, Little Miss Sunshine, to explore the notion of beauty. A fine writer, Alexandra discusses the adverse effect*

negative comments can have on a young girl's psyche as well as the transformative effect of affirmation. Her essay is focused and clear; her voice strong and persuasive.