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Dolls in *The Bluest Eye*

The other dolls, which were supposed to bring me great pleasure, succeeded in doing quite the opposite. When I took it to bed, its hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh—the tapered fingertips on those dimpled hands scratched. If, in my sleep, I turned, the bone-cold head collided with my own. It was a most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion. To hold it was no more rewarding. The starched gauze or lace on the cotton dress irritated any embrace. I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. “Here,” they said, “this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it.” I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. (Morrison 20-21)

Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*. Instead, it is prescribed by the dominant, homogenous culture and has the capacity to destroy the lives of those who do not fit that standard. The novel confronts the way internalized white beauty ideals destroy the lives of black women and men through the experiences of many characters, specifically Claudia MacTeer, a young girl who first contends with the learned self-hate by the black community through a doll she receives as a gift and Maureen Peal.

Claudia is powerless on three different levels: as a child, as a female, and as an African-American. This powerlessness is demonstrated when she receives a blonde, blue-eyed baby doll for Christmas and her inability to understand why she is supposed to love the doll in the first place. She feels no tenderness or motherly urges for the doll, nor does she find companionship in

it, but she knows that it is “supposed to bring [her] great pleasure” despite the fact that she finds herself hating it. The doll itself is literally lifeless and cold, and yet it is still a manifestation of what she is supposed to find beautiful according to her society; everyone else finds the doll attractive, but there is something sterile about it with its “bone-cold head,” “starched gauze,” and “glassy blue eyeballs” that Claudia cannot find beauty in or love. Because she is a child, Claudia does not understand that beauty is a concept that is taught as one matures, and so she dismembers the doll in search of “what it was that all the world said was lovable,” only to find that there is nothing except metal. The irony here is difficult to miss—the doll is supposed to be the ultimate symbol of beauty, but it is literally nothing underneath the painted façade.

Unlike Pecola and Frieda, Claudia hates Shirley Temple, another symbol for American beauty. Perhaps this is Morrison’s way of saying that adhering to or believing in white culture’s perceptions of beauty is a part of maturation for minority women. This seems to be the case for Claudia since she hints that though she has not yet learned to love her blue-eyed doll, she will eventually become victim to the subjugation of idealized white beauty. The significance and symbolism of the doll reappears in the novel with the appearance of Maureen Peal, who further reinforces the idea that whiteness is beautiful and blackness is ugly with her perfect clothes and seemingly perfect life. Claudia notes that the entire school’s demeanor towards Maureen is a positive one where neither white or black boys harass her in the hallways and all the girls want to be her friend, an experience completely divergent to what Claudia faces from her peers as a black girl. Morrison’s intention is clear here: doll-like Maureen is idolized for her beauty; *she* fits the standard whereas black girls like Claudia do not, and as young girls like Claudia begin to internalize these interactions, they begin to fall into patterns of self-hatred for their own bodies

and blackness, as well as the blackness of their communities, such as Pecola and her desire for blue eyes.

Resistance against conformity and acceptance of one's self seems to be the key at the heart of Morrison's story. Contrary to Pecola, who remains passive and compliant in the suppression of her blackness, Claudia actively questions and fights back against her supposed ugliness. Maybe this is why at the end of the novel, Pecola is the character who is rendered into insanity as a price for her blue eyes, but Claudia becomes a symbol of hope and love.

#### Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007.