

## Beauty Matters, Race Matters: Issues of Beauty in the African-American Family in *The Bluest Eye* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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### Abstract

This essay studies Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the stories of black girls relating their color to the beauty standards set by white America. It shows the role families play on these girls' reaction to these standards.

Keywords: Beauty Standards. African-american. Family. Double-consciousness.

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois coined the term "double-consciousness" to define the feeling every African-American in the United States had – that of the dualities and conflict in their self-perception. The domination of the white culture in America creates in the African-Americans the impression that they should be judged through the eyes of whites. In this sense, blacks see themselves as a group mediated by the other world. The "two warring ideals" of being both African and American, or rather, neither African nor American in "one dark body" is what DuBois calls "double-consciousness."

Beauty ideals are a solid instantiation of the feeling of double-consciousness as black people, and girls specifically in this study, often look at themselves and judge their appearance through whites' standards. This turns out to be a complex issue since the construction of the idea of race in relation to whites (who are not a race in themselves for they are the norm) shows that dark bodies will never fit the beauty standards set by the dominant group.

Young black girls come to take the racism they undergo as a result of their looks. If they are not loved as much as the Shirley Temples they come across in life, it is for sure because they are not as pretty, that is, not as white, or as blond, or as blue-eyed, and thus, undeserving of such adoration.

The experience of double-consciousness, that is, of relating their physical appearance to that of mainstream culture (white) and of finding out they do not fit the pattern may be common to many women. Nevertheless, the results may vary. Some women learn self-loath. Others learn to resist. This variation of the so-called black women's plight is not the only possible version for the lives of African-American women.

One alternative black girls have is suggested by bell hooks. The critic sees the homeplace as a site of possible resistance. Contrary to what has been stated by many scholars, it is not the organization of the family that stabilizes the lives of young girls as they grow up, it is the relations the members of these families establish between one another and the way they engage in these relations. As bell hooks declares:

Black people have created a variety of meaningful and productive lifestyles that do not conform to white societal norms. Failure to document healthy productive households that do not conform to prevailing notions of the nuclear family helps further the erroneous assumption that any household that deviates from the accepted pattern is destructive (hooks, 1990, p. 76-77).

The homeplace, according to hooks, has a "subversive value" because it is the private space where we [African-Americans] do not directly encounter white racist aggression... domestic space has been a crucial site for organizing, for forming political solidarity. Its structure was defined less by whether or not black women and men were conforming to sexist behavior norms and more by our struggle to uplift ourselves as a people, our struggle to resist racist domination and oppression (HOOKS, 1990, p. 47).

This was the case of the McTeers' household in *The Bluest Eye* and also of Marguerite Johnson's in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as the narrators of both stories describe many familial contexts. Conversely, Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* is the product of a family who fails to create a site of resistance for her.

In the three family organizations that are presented in the two works (the Breedloves and the McTeers in *The Bluest Eye* and the Hendersons/Baxters – Maya's mother's and father's families with whom she lives in different moments of her life – in the *Caged Bird*), three different arrangements can be noticed. The McTeers are a complete family made up of father, mother and children (Claudia and Frieda). Even though they seem harsh when treating their children they are caring and loving. They demonstrate their affection by creating a safe environment for their girls in which they are cared for. Hence, the apparent harshness is, in fact, a strict system to which the children must conform as a consequence of the callousness of life itself. In spite of this, they are never mistreated.

The site of resistance that bell hooks talks about is clearly perceptible as Claudia McTeer develops a critical posture towards the condition imposed on her for being black. The episode when she dismantled the baby dolls she got for Christmas questioning why she did not resemble her looks, and the revulsion she feels when girls like Shirley Temple and Maureen Peal (the new girl at school who is not white but has a far lighter skin complexion) are worshipped by black people like Pecola, her schoolmates and teachers and even at some points by her own sister Frieda show her resisting position.

Pecola Breedlove, on the other hand, struggles to survive in a family who is falling apart. The family is also constituted by mother, father and children (Pecola and her older brother Sammy), but the relations established by them are totally pathological, what confirms that it is not the family structure that is responsible for who the girls happen to become and for how they construct their identity and self-perception.

Pecola learns from her mother, who loves the movies and her white employer's family, that white is beautiful. Seeing that Pauline Breedlove cares much more for the Fishers' girl than for her own, she concludes that it must be because of her looks; just like Shirley Temple is cherished and she is avoided by the whole community.

Besides, her father Cholly Breedlove is a drunkard who has no model of parental love. He is also the source of the most extreme pain she has been under and the one that makes her deduce once and for all that she is not loved because she is ugly. While he skips town after the sexual abuse, her mother, Pauline Breedlove, reinforces this rejection as she does not believe her daughter: "Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove? I did tell her! ... You don't understand, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her" (MORRISON, 1994, p. 200).

The episodes she goes through at home make it clear for Pecola that the rejection and discrimination she suffers out in the community are justifiable and acceptable. Her family and the relations they engage in are so unstable that she does not learn how to resist – ever. Instead, she looks for Soaphead Church who, in her tormented mind, gives her the blue eyes she so much yearns for.

The belief that only a miracle could save her prevented Pecola from seeing her beauty. She, a double-conscious girl, seeks Soaphead Church because she learned from her family that she could only see herself through the eyes of other people: through the eyes of the teacher and other white people who avoided glancing at her, through the eyes of boys and girls who took their own self-hatred out on her: “when one of the girls wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, ‘Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!’” (MORRISON, 1994, p. 46).

Marguerite Johnson, in the *Caged Bird*, also wanted to look like “one of those little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right with the world” (ANGELOU, 1988, p. 1). Like Pecola, her sense of reality was distorted and she wishfully thought of the day she would wake up from her “black ugly dream.” She also constantly compared herself to her brother Bailey who had beautiful skin and hair. Nonetheless, Marguerite did not dwell on the fact that she felt ugly because she had a family who, in spite of not fitting the Western conventions of the structure of a family, was very supportive and always encouraged her to move on. Because she was regarded as capable and was shown appreciation and love by most of her relatives, she embraced the experience of growing up courageously and confidently.

Momma Henderson, who raises Maya and her brother in their early years, is the embodiment of the Big Momma in African-American tradition. She is severe but very protective and loving of her grandchildren. She inflicts a lot of discipline upon them and teaches them the precepts of a religious life. With her, Maya learns to resist by enduring the sorrows of life.

The other imperative figure in Marguerite’s life is her own mother, Vivian Baxter (and her extended family – her uncles and her influential light-skinned grandmother) with whom she goes to live when she is a bit older. She shows support and love above all things. She teaches resistance to her daughter by refusing to be subservient to men and to white people. She also teaches her children to be free but to be responsible for their choices.

Bailey, Jr., her brother, also supports Maya at all times. Besides being her companion throughout her childhood, he is also the one who defends her at any cost and is her role model and the one who introduces her into the pleasures of reading.

The experience she has with her real father, Bailey, Mr., is not a very gratifying one. However, at this point, she is brave enough to refuse being humiliated and leaves his house and his life during the summer visit she pays him in southern California.

Another indication that Vivian’s brothers provided protection for her children is the episode of Maya’s rape. She is raped and is afraid to tell about the incident. The day after Mr. Freeman’s trial he appears dead. Nobody comments on the fact but the impression is that the brothers took care of the matter (showing a different ethics from the Western rules and laws).

Finally, Daddy Clidell becomes an important father-like presence in Maya’s life as she slowly comes to trust and respect him. From him she learns the “Principle of

Reverse” with which he resists oppression: he is able to triumph over white people by deceiving them.

The reader is able to apprehend from the three family models presented in the two works that families are a great influence in the life of the African-American girl as she grows up under a solid system of racism that dictates the beauty standards as those of the white “race”. The homeplace, however unconventional it may be, should be the place where, “we [African-Americans] had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits” (hooks, 1990, p. 42).

In the *Caged Bird* and in *The Bluest Eye* respectively, Marguerite and Claudia learn to resist. We learn that about Claudia because she, as the narrator of the story, shows she has become a critical woman able to reflect on her condition and that of her friend Pecola, as well as on the position of her people. Marguerite grows up and, encouraged by family and teachers who recognize her talent, freely expresses herself through drama and dance developing a sense of black aesthetic and arts that bell hooks describes as “a way to escape one’s plight” (hooks, 1990, p. 106).

In contrast, Pecola cannot resist the oppression she suffers and is trapped in this same oppression by conforming to it. Her family is not ready to provide a safe homeplace where resistance can take place because they themselves are convinced of their ugliness and, therefore, of their position as victims.

In *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Alice Walker says that the poet Jean Toomer found in the South of the early twenties “creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope” (TOOMER quoted in WALKER, 1994, p. 401). These women, according to Toomer, became “Saints”, because they were the ones to carry the burdens of everyone else – they were the “mule of the world” (TOOMER quoted in WALKER, 1994, p. 404). Alice Walker states that these women were African-American mothers and grandmothers who were not Saints but actually Artists filled with spirituality and creativity.

This creativity sprang from different sources and was revealed in different artistic manifestations. The example she has is her mother’s, who took care of feeding her spirit by tending the garden (the reason why Walker titled the essay *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*).

Claudia McTeer and Maya Angelou have definitely found their own gardens too inspired by a family (in particular their mothers and big mommas) who is caring and loving enough and who encourages them to search for their gardens. As for Pecola, her family teaches her that she deserves to continue being the “mule of the world”, that she is fit for being “handed the burdens that everyone else – everyone else – refused to carry” (WALKER, 1994, p. 405) offering her no chance for resisting or subverting her position.

#### Resumo

O ensaio focaliza estórias de meninas negras (*The Bluest Eye*, de Toni Morrison e *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, de Maya Angelou) crescendo em uma sociedade que dita padrões de beleza dos quais elas não fazem parte. O texto busca explicar o papel fundamental das famílias nesse processo.

Palavras-chave: Padrões de beleza. Relações familiares. Afro-americanos. Double-consciousness.

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