

The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye* provides the contemporary reader with a first hand view of the hardship faced by African-Americans in the 1950's. These hardships, which were many and multi-faceted, were largely the result of negative social identities. These social identities were propagated and reinforced on an out-group, in-group, and individual level. This analysis, with the use of contemporary social theories, will seek to delve into the identity sources and replications of the character named Pecola in Morrison's novel.

The first obvious appearance of social identity in *The Bluest Eye* comes with the example of Pecola, who prefers above all other containers to drink out of her Shirley Temple cup. The reason for her preference lies in Shirley's blue eyes. Pecola throughout her life knew that she was ugly, her father, mother, and brother were all ugly and so was she. As a result, Pecola looked upon Shirley and her blue eyes, worthy of being placed on her cup, as an icon of beauty. Her image, placed upon a cup and all over the silver screen, was something the out-group and dominant culture in Pecola's life had idolized. True beauty, Shirley's beauty, was something no black girl could ever aspire to achieve.

In his discussion of cognitivism, Sampson explains the analogy of the mind as a computer, which is:

"...like a computer, processing the information it received from the world according to its inner structures and principles of organization (e.g. its programs), cranking out the organized and meaningful world in which we live."¹

The idea of cognitivism readily explains the why Pecola desired blue eyes. She had received the concept of beauty from an outside stimulus, which her mind used to create an identity that would be acceptable to others. She would no longer be ugly, but beautiful. In this way, Pecola made an identity for herself that genetics limited her from achieving. Therefore, her own mind reinforced the idea that she was ugly and less of a person than members of the out-group (i.e. Caucasians), or in essence Shirley Temple.

The second source of Pecola's ugliness comes from stimuli received from members of the out-group actually in her life, namely Mr. Yacobowski. In a poignant scene, Pecola decides to purchase candy from Mr. Yacobowski's grocery store. As she offers up the change to pay for her candy, he looks down at her in distaste, or in Morrison's description: "She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition- the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended... The distaste must be for her, her blackness."²

As the scene progresses, Morrison describes how Mr. Yacobowski scrapes the change out of her hand in an attempt to limit his actual physical contact with her.

Pecola's personal out-group experience provided yet another occasion that reinforced her ugliness. A member of the out-group, (the group capable of having blue eyes) had not only rejected her due to her blackness, but rejected her humanity. Mr. Yacobowski's treatment is a result of the white ethnocentrism present in the 1950's which as Hewstone and Cairns explain is "defined as the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled or rated with reference to it."³ Mr. Yacobowski's ethno centrist outlook on

¹ Sampson, Edward E. "Celebrating the Other". pg 59

² Morrison, Toni. "The Bluest Eye." pgs. 48-49.

³ Cairns, Ed and Miles Hewstone. "Social Psychology and Intergroup Conflict." pg. 320

Pecola readily displayed to her that she was rated as less than the out-group in her life. Once again, Pecola's world showed her how ugly she was.

Pecola's identity in society had yet another source of negativity, which originated from those of her own race that looked down upon poorer, less fortunate blacks. This was a new kind of hate, a hate that she had not experienced from members of her own race, which was class hatred. In this scene of the book Pecola is lured into the home of a boy named Junior. His mother, Geraldine, has throughout his life offered more love to the family's blue eyed, black cat than to him. Junior uses this opportunity to kill his mother's cat and blame it on Pecola. When Geraldine arrives home to see what has happened, she become angry and tells her, "Get out you nasty little black bitch."⁴ Earlier in the story Geraldine had explained to Junior the difference between "colored people and niggers."

The class/racial identity introduced in this part of the novel displays one of the many consequences of white racism. Geraldine lived her life in an upper class world (i.e. as upper class as blacks could achieve at that time). However, her stature as a decent or "colored" person, in the eyes of her white, middle class peers was constantly threatened by what she saw in her mind as poorly kept, and poorly mannered "niggers." The positive identity that Geraldine had made for herself was one that placed her above less fortunate members of her race. For this reason, she lashed out at Pecola, simply because of her disheveled appearance and Junior's accusation.

Hewstone and Cairns offer a good explanation for Geraldine's behavior in their explanation of Henri Tajfel's writings. According to Tajfel's reasoning group behavior typically fits into three major characteristics:

"First, at least two clearly identifiable social categories must be present in the situation... Second, there should be little variability of behavior or attitude within each group... Third, a member of one group should show little variability in his or her perception or treatment of members of the other group."⁵

While the first criterion does not lend itself well to this example, the latter criteria (particularly the third) explain Geraldine's reaction to Pecola. She was not only black like Pecola, but Pecola was in her house, which was a threat to her identity. In order for Geraldine to truly feel like she was on par with her white middle class counter parts, she had to have a quaint, well kept house. This strikes a strong cord with Tajfel's second criterion for group behavior. Her home emulated the homes of those from which she desired acceptance. She also had to act like white people in order to identify with them, which meant that she had to display her distaste for black people of lesser stature, or in the example of Tajfel's third criterion, the other. In order to be deemed acceptable by other members of the middle class, once again she had to emulate the behavior of her peers. She had to find the other in her life, and treat it the same way middle class whites did, which was with distaste and disgust. Since she obviously could not hate all blacks, she had to find a group within her own racial group to reject. She had to find a best fit between what her white peers hated, and what she could justify hating.

This was yet another formative event for Pecola's negative identity of herself. Junior, a member of what she clearly thought was part of her in-group (or she would not have trusted him), had betrayed her. This, coupled with Geraldine's harsh words, in a matter of moments

⁴ Morrison, Toni. "The Bluest Eye." pg. 91

⁵ Cairns, Ed and Miles Hewstone. "Social Psychology and Intergroup Conflict." pg. 324

catapulted Pecola from the false security of what she thought was her in-group, into the world of the other.

Nearly every experience mentioned by Morrison in Pecola's life (while she was still sane) reinforced the concept that she was ugly and undesired. Any chance of having a positive identity and self esteem throughout her life was dashed to pieces by acts of hate committed by members of the out-groups in her life, and the groups to which she actually belonged. These events were piled on top of the poor identity she had received from her unfortunate family situation, along with her own personal belief that she was ugly.

These factors readily show why Pecola so readily identified with the Maginot Line, China, and Poland. They treated her like any other little girl. When she was with them she was not ugly, she was not poor and unmannered, and she was not black, she was just a little girl. The apartment above her own where the prostitutes lived was the only place it seems that Pecola could go without wishing she was something or someone else.

However, the simple fact that Pecola could not spend her entire life in the Maginot Line's apartment meant that she had to go places where her social identity was vulnerable. This fact is the most indicative reason for Pecola's love for the Shirley Temple cup. In her mind, if she had Shirley's blue eyes, she would be loved everywhere she went, and she would no longer be vulnerable. It appears that blue eyes were the only venue in Pecola's immature mind to escape her identity as unwanted and ugly. In all likelihood, a psycho analysis of Pecola would show that her search for a positive identity had driven her to resort to Soaphead Church for blue eyes, and in the end led her to believe that she did have blue eyes.

Morrison aptly displays how social identities are formed and replicated in a person's life. The example of Pecola, while rather extreme in many cases, show the extent to which occurrences of rejection can be heavily formative. Furthermore, the story of Pecola creates an excellent framework for understanding how difficult the fight for a positive social identity and self esteem. Perhaps the most intriguing facet of Pecola's search for identity is the enormous scope and power of unhindered racism. White racism had caused members of Pecola's own in-group to hate each other.

In conclusion, the social identities in place in *The Bluest Eye* provide excellent examples of how social identities are created and then replicated. Furthermore, the novel renders hard evidence of how hard social and group identities are to break. Morrison's writings are truly an exemplary display of the difficulties involved in obtaining a positive social identity.