

# A New Historicist Study of the Bluest Eye

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes Toni Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* with the theory of New Historicism. From the perspective of "text history", the novel reproduces the plight of African Americans and participates in the reconstruction of history. From the perspective of "historical textuality", the novel deconstructs the official discourse, and shows the unique black culture to regain the voice of black people in the state of aphasia. The politically-oriented new historicism opens a fresh viewpoint to understand American society.

**Keywords:** *The Bluest Eye*; New Historicism; historicity of text; textuality of history.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, the 1993 Nobel Prize winner, is definitely one of the most important African American writer. She devotes all her life into writing essential aspects of American reality in her novels like *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998) and *Love* (2003). The achievement she scores in literary arena marks another monument in African American literature after the summit achieved by Richard White and Ralph Ellison.

As for her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* was derived from her own childhood experience: one of her classmates in the elementary school wished for the eyes of a white girl and she felt inferiority originating from physical appearance. Eventually this experience developed into this novel. *The Bluest Eye* tells of an eleven years old black girl Pecola's painful yearning for acceptance and love as she prays for the blue eyes of a white girl. Pecola believes that the reason she is despised and ridiculed is that she is black and, therefore, ugly. Later, the poor girl is raped and impregnated by her own father. Unable to withstand the heavy blow, she finally goes insane and withdraws into a fantasy world. After its publication, *The Bluest Eye* has attracted extensive researches from various perspectives, and this paper attempts to use New Historicism in order to get a thorough understanding of the novel as well as the American society.

New Historicism, as one of the significant literary critical theories in the 20th century, emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The new historicists maintain that all human activities are interconnected while opposing that a text can be evaluated in isolation from its cultural context. Particularly, the researches adopted by those New Historicists are claimed as politically-oriented. The New Historicism seems almost designed to "methodize the political interpretation of literature".[1] In the words of the New Historicist Louis Montrose, this approach is interested in "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history". [2]

## II. HISTORICITY OF THE TEXT IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

For New historicist Louis A. Montrose and other new historicist critics, literature is inseparable from other forms of representation and culture, inseparable from the milieu of social relationships. On the one hand, literary texts are considered as symbolic formations which differ in no respect from other symbolic formations, including historical events and trends. On the other hand, new historicists treat literature as an active part of a particular historical moment or an agent in constructing a culture's sense of reality. Then they build a conversation between literature and history. As John Brannigan says, "for new historicism... the object of study is not the text and its context, not literature and history, but rather literature in history." [3]

### A. Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement in 1960s was triggered by the denial of basic rights and insisting on the protection of equal opportunity. The novel *The Bluest Eye*, even though without riots in the sense of those prevalent in the society, abounds in disturbance and violence; therefore it can also serve as a unique footnote for the period.

The novel presents an unfortunate state of being “outdoors”. Since people couldn’t control their income, being outdoors becomes an aspect of life. This kind of poverty is not confined in a few families; actually, it is quite common. The novel also reveals that the African Americans, as an ethnic group, had long been deprived of equal employment opportunity in the 1960s and before. In the novel, the father Cholly was determined to go to the north where he believes “steel mills were begging for workers.” [4] However, life in the north was not as good as they expected. The reason why the African Americans endure these severe bitterness lies in the fact that the “Negroes” are invisible. When Pecola harbors a “sweet, enduring, even cherished irritation, full of promise and delicate security” to buy Mary Janes candy in Yacobowski’s store, she notices “the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge”, and “this vacuum is not new to her” because she has seen it “lurking in the eyes of all white people”. [4] The harmful living environment both inside and outside home thwarts her sound development.

### B. Changes in the Black Family Structure

*The Moynihan Report* issued by American government makes the statement that at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. Morrison catches these changes in the novel.

Traditionally, the masculine feature is strong, responsible and courageous. A man is expected to exhibit these attributes when confronted with pressures, hardships, even dangers. No matter for what kind of reason, the black men fail to provide enough money to sustain their families. Nor can they render necessary affection or education to their children. As for family structure of those blacks, especially the lower class, is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching completely breakdown. Readers of this novel will get astonished by the indifference in Cholly’s family. There is no communication at all among family members; on the contrary, they exist as an individual and with their own will. Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove’s married life is characterized with a “darkly brutal formalism”. [4] And Geraldine’s, a seemingly peaceful family with economic security compared with other black families, as a matter of fact, reveals disturbance and abnormality beneath external tranquility.

The two families discussed above can never be taken as individual case; actually they should be taken as a specimen for black families. Voluntarily or involuntarily, the two families show profound influence from the whites. It is the cruel erosion of white dominant culture that makes the black abandon their blackness and develop self-hatred towards people of their own race.

### C. Roles of *The Bluest Eye* Played in History-making

New Historicism holds that literature, as a constitutive and inseparable agent, plays important roles in the making of history, and this novel is no exception. The novel not only criticizes the standard of beauty among the white and black people, but also makes a satire of American democratic creed.

The novel illustrates a recurring interest in black people who have accommodated themselves to white society by appropriating white values which was represented by the standard of beauty: white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes. The opposite of beauty is ugliness. To embrace white standard of beauty means that the African Americans are ugly. And this subtle and pervasive power is quite destructive to individual as well as a whole race. Morrison insists that African-American’s emphasis should be on spiritual beauty rather than physical one. If they succeed in achieving that, they would be able to rid themselves of the internalized racism. Just as Hooks cautions: “if internalized racism enters the souls of Black folks through years of socialization then we are not going to be rid of it by simply giving shallow expression to the notion that “Black is Beautiful.” [5]

With the pronouncement of the *Declaration of Independence*, the founding father of America set up the well-known creed that all men are created equal. However, if things come to the African Americans, a great satire to this so-called creed emerges. The civil rights movement broke racial segregation and won real political and legal freedom for American blacks; however, direct racism turned into a more indirect and subtle form of discrimination, depriving African Americans of lots of opportunities. In a seemingly democratic country, it seems abnormal for such an immoral and unfair fact to last for that long.

### III. TEXTUALITY OF HISTORY IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

New Historicists proclaim that history is a text, a story, or a narrative, which indicates historical facts exist only as “textual traces”, and we can only know history in textual forms and by way of prior textualization. To those theorists, to say that the past is only known to us through textual traces is not the same as saying that the past is only textual. History then, has a subjective and fictive element as a result of such kind of selection and rearrangement. New Historicism holds a doubting position toward the validity of the official version of history which is provided and accepted as a true reflection of what actually happened

#### A. Narrated “histories” against Orthodox “History”

To reveal the truth, Morrison focuses her attention on minor figures and stories that happen around them. In such doing, deep secret thoughts and little-understood frustrations in the African Americans to which the Old Historicism will turn a blind eye are revealed.

The strategy taken by the New Historicists to retrieve the “truth of history” is to doubt the authority of “official history”, and discover “unofficial history” in order to complement history. The whole novel tells the story of Pecola, interweaving within it are stories of other figures related with that of Pecola’s. Morrison adopts such absurd forbidden behavior of incest. Clearly it is easy to notice: “tenderly” break his daughter’s neck, and “fuck” her “tenderly”. [4] To this brutal act, readers may feel reluctant to hate the rapist father because of the vague idea: the father, to some extent, is also victim.

In this regard, the uncertainty in narration, or contradiction in narration, illustrates what the New Historicism upholds. History, in the eyes of New Historicists, is no longer the single, unified, unproblematic, progressive, quite the contrary, there is only discontinuous and contradictory “histories” and a unified “History” is nothing but a myth propagated by the ruling classes in their own interests.

#### B. Intertextuality between *The Bluest Eye* and Other Pre-texts

From the viewpoint of new historicists, every text is the adaptation, citation, transposition and collage of previous texts rather than an isolated creation. Thus, an intertextual study of the novel with other pre-texts proves necessary.

The novel was arranged by the author in such a particular structure that each of its sections provides a gloss on the key phrases from the Dick and Jane. This technique employed by Morrison is to deconstruct the bourgeois myths of ideal family life. “By removing the punctuation from these fragments,” as Barbara Christian put it, “Morrison heightens the lack of internal integrity essential to their simplistic order”. [6] Each element of the myth proves to be deceptive and inaccurate when it comes to African American life. Taking into account the fact that the primer appears in the text books of primary schools and its short structure of sentences like chansons, we can conclude that the prevalence of this myth actually is negation of the black done by the dominant white. Once the blacks are to be convinced that ideal family, the social stigma will impose a strong conviction on children who are different that they are abnormal and unacceptable.

*The Ugly Duckling*, a well-known fairy tale recounts the bitter experience of an ugly duckling in a whole year. The same story is retold in *The Bluest Eye*; however, the author manages to extent its touch to a much broader background of American reality. In the fairy tale, the ugly duckling is only an isolated case, while when things come to Pecola, it becomes much more universal. In fact, she is not the only ugly person in the community, and a majority of the black in the community under strong erosion of white-dominant culture feels that they are ugly. Pecola’s existence just reminds them constantly of their own ugliness; consequently, Pecola serves as scapegoat in the community. Thus it is not only the dominant white culture that is responsible for Pecola’s tragedy. The black community, devoid of any sympathy, fails to render necessary help to the both physically and psychologically fragile creature.

*The Moynihan Report*, with a full name of “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action”, after providing adequate seemingly persuasive statistics, it points out that the fundamental problem lies in the disintegration of the black families and naturally calls for national efforts to stabilize the black family structure.

Viewed intertextually, *The Bluest Eye*, with Morrison’s apparent racial stance, will defy the conclusion.. Pauline narrates the episode that the employer advises Pauline to leave Cholly because of his abusive treatment of her. This part of Pauline’s narration reveals the misunderstanding and conflict between black women and white women. Pauline, obviously privileges race over any concept of sisterhood. The two completely different world separated by race and class come into conflict even if her marriage with Cholly breeds only combat or destruction. The novel makes it clear that there are enormous gap between the whites and blacks, not only in the sphere of economy as what has been pointed in chapter three, but more importantly in the sphere of thoughts.

### C. Appropriation of Blues

There is a profound historical and cultural basis for Morrison to employ blues in her novel. The blues contains plenty of cultural information of African Americans. W. E. B Du Bois calls it “the soul of Black Folk.”[7]

The blues is often associated with sadness and desperation. As an African American writer, Morrison is always concerned with the experience of the black people. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison sings her novel in a blues fashion. Claudia tells Pecola’s tragedy in the tradition of blues narrative. The question of “Why am I so black and blue?” lingers in Pecola’s mind throughout the novel. Again and again, she is convinced that she must stay back because of her blackness in a world where white skin and blue eyes are taken as standard of beauty.

Firmly gripped by the sense of ugliness, self-hatred, Pecola is made speechless. It is, in fact, through Claudia, sometimes the omniscient narrator, that Pecola’s stories are revealed. But Morrison doesn’t stop at Pecola’s personal tragedy. Her intention is to touch the shared experience through a little black girl’s story, as a blues singer does, to give an individualized account of collective suffering. In a sense the novel is also the community’s blues; Pecola may be the central character, but she is far from the only victim of the bluest eye. The community’s lack of sympathy and the role it plays in Pecola’s tragedy may be found in Claudia’s reflection. Thus, the author sings Pecola’s story in the tradition of blues and through which, she expands the themes of the novel.

### D. Road of Salvation: Persistence and Culture

For African Americans, blues is a way of life. The blues is not only an expression of sad or happy moods but also an attitudes inspired by the loss of life-force and an effort to regain the lost life-force.

Blues-singing women populate the novel. Claudia recalls some snatches of lyrics from her mother’s songs, but what arrests her most is her mother’s voice rather than the loss and pain revealed in the song. As Morrison implies, the cultural heritage and values essential to the survival in black current situation, are orally transmitted to Claudia by her mother’s song and have exerted an instructive impact on her in the process of maturity. Whatever misfortune and hardships she encounters in life, she learns to tell and channel it through the soothing blues.

Being a staunch supporter of the African traditional culture, Morrison reveals the conception that black culture is the soul and backbone of black people. Moreover, the novel also appeals to the white readers to become aware of the destructive impact they impose upon the blacks. In this multinational era, each culture poses its advantages and disadvantages, all culture should stand equally in the world stage and people of each ethnic should have the power to speak.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The novel *The Bluest Eye* revolves around the tragic story of an 11-year-old black girl and her depressed heart, and outlines the universal inner world among African Americans. This is not the tragedy of Pecola alone, but the spiritual history of African Americans as a whole. This novel also reflects the unique historical view of the new historicism. The New historicism interprets literary works as a political interpretation. Morrison portrays the status quo of black people in his novels and also participates in the reconstruction of history through his novels. In addition, new historicism, as a kind of cultural poetry, also combines politics and aesthetics perfectly. In the novel, Morrison takes advantage of African American’s unique music—the blues, enhances national confidence and overturns the western “logocentrism” by highlighting its unique national culture. In an era of globalization, cultural diversity should be respected, and different nations and cultures should have equal dialogue platforms and have the right to speak on this equal platform

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