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Research Article

**When Desire Turns into Need:
A Baudrillardian-Lacanian Reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*****Parvaneh Shojaei¹
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ABSTRACT

Published in 1970, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* explores the influence of advertising in shaping desires and establishing societal standards of beauty through its strategic use of visual imagery and packaging. The protagonist, Pecola, becomes immersed in a world dominated by consumerist symbols and icons derived from photography, film, and advertising. This leads her to pursue products not out of necessity but rather from a desire to conform to these constructed ideals. This analysis employs a Baudrillardian-Lacanian framework to examine how advertisements promise the allure of blue eyes, symbolizing Pecola's aspirations and desires. *The Bluest Eye* serves as a poignant commentary on the need to redefine and reconstruct beauty standards, particularly for African Americans, to challenge the dominant white-defined ideals perpetuated by advertising. Morrison's narrative underscores the detrimental effects of these imposed standards, advocating for resistance against the narrow definitions of beauty often dictated by consumer culture. Through this lens, the novel not only critiques the superficiality of advertising but also calls for a broader understanding of beauty that embraces diversity and authenticity.

Keywords: Baudrillard, Consumer Culture, Desire, Lacan, Need, Simulation, *The Bluest Eye*



1. Introduction

Toni Morrison has written various novels, including *Sula* (1973), *Song of Songs* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1978), and *Jazz* (1992), to name a few. Morrison's works directly address black people while exploring the African American experience. Racism, infanticide, rape, etc, are all depicted in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Furthermore, all her novels can be analyzed in relation to racial segregation and African American experience, and various approaches can be used to analyze them. This study builds on an argument that claims *The Bluest Eye* critiques the definition, construction, and imposition of white-defined standards on the black community and depicts the damaging effect of white-defined advertising on black characters in the novel, as well as the African Americans, beyond the fictional text. Morrison consistently propagates the black's redefinition and reconstruction of standards beyond the fictional text. This study argues that *The Bluest Eye* emphasizes the redefinition and reconstruction of standards to assist African Americans in resisting these imposed white-defined standards resulting from white-defined advertisements. The works of Baudrillard and Lacan will thus serve as the theoretical foundation for the arguments made in this study.

The Bluest Eye has been interpreted and analyzed by different approaches. Due to Morrison's devotion to depicting the black's pain and experiences in white society, various researchers examine the style, structure, and language of this novel and read it from different perspectives to discuss the impacts of race and discrimination on African American people as well as the damaging effects of white-defined standards on self-degradation, loss of identity, and on alienation as well as segregation of black people, especially women, in African American society. This section explores in detail what these researchers have advanced about the selected novel. Mankhia and Alhousseini (2020) analyzed the style of *The Bluest Eye* and classified it as a polyphonic novel based on its narrative technique and structure, with emphasis on themes and language. They read this novel from a Bakhtinian perspective.

To illustrate the effects of race and discrimination on black women who have lost their identity in order to conform to white norms and, therefore, be accepted by white society, Morrison employs a number of voices and narrators, including a first-person narrator and a third-person narrator in the novel. While Mankhia and Alhousseini argue that the characters convey their own inner conflicts, pains, and experiences in African-American society by white-defined standards, this study examines neither materialism nor the impact of advertisements on Pecola's actions as she strives to change her looks in a Caucasian manner. Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* emphasizes that standards, especially white standards, are defined and constructed by the white class as the dominant group of the society. Using the theory of hegemony, Trisnawati (2016) studies the implications resulting from the hegemony of white standards. This study shows that the dominant and more powerful group in society defines and creates beauty standards. According to this study, the white beauty standard hegemony results in characters competing with each other to seek white's approval, that is intra-racial discrimination. This hegemony also leads to self-loathing, and self-identity degrading. Trisnawati stresses that the White, without existing in the novel, exercises its hegemony over the African American people, especially black women, through defining and constructing white-defined standards. The desires that advertising arouses in consumers were not considered in this study. White-defined standards in the African American community alienate black people, especially women, from within and from the society they live in. Sadehi and Nia (2011) discuss how language helps the characters in this novel face their past. In other words, to shape her/his subjectivity and become a unified subject, s/he needs to enter the symbolic realm, use language, and express her/his individuality as 'I.' Otherwise, s/he will not have a unified subjectivity and will remain a heterogeneous subject (15). Pecola is a melancholic subject who, as a result of confronting many troubles due to her skin, "does not talk to other people but to herself" (18). This study, using Kristeva's definition,



characterizes Pecola as an abject character. Surrounded and hunted by the white-defined standards, she "seeks her being within the other" and, therefore, "has not fully integrated her subjectivity" (17). Although Sadehi and Nia examine the harmful consequences of prevailing beauty standards for black women and the impact of white beauty standards in distorting Pecola's subjectivity, this study does not examine the role of advertising images in creating new false desires and distorting genuine needs.

In the above-mentioned studies, the analysis of black women's attempts to match the dominant body standards and norms deemed necessary for women in Morrison's selected novel does not go quite far enough. Following this section, the researcher focuses on a Baudrillardian- Lacanian reading of *The Bluest Eye* to examine the role of white norms evoked by white-defined advertising in stimulating new false desires and distorting real needs, as well as their harmful effects on African Americans in general and African American women in particular. This research answers the following questions: What role does advertising play in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*? How do Morrison's characters react to consumer culture? How does Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* justify the role of simulation in turning false desires into real needs? How does Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* justify the role of advertising in turning false desires into real needs?

2. Methodology

This study aims to look into how desire becomes a need in *The Bluest Eye*. The Baudrillard approach and the Lacanian approach are both used to accomplish this. According to Lacan, in the symbolic realm, the need is articulated through language. Due to the language incapability, which cannot fully articulate the need in the demand, desire appears. The satisfaction of this part of need, i.e., desire, is not possible by real or natural objects. There are only object causes of desire, things that embody the lack and make promises to address it; no actual objects exist to satiate desire (Stavrakakis, 2006, p. 90).

Another approach is also adopted. Baudrillard contends that television, cinema, and advertising images, as well as idealized representations of the human body, construct reality rather than represent it. This image is called *Simulacra* (Deal and Beal, 2004, p. 52). Simulation constructs reality. According to Baudrillard, images in advertisements promote 'hope' (Stavrakakis, 2006, p. 91), and Lacan points out that advertising arouses false desires. Therefore, understanding how advertisements that contain promises create a body image and influence consumer behavior requires both Lacanian and Baudrillardian perspectives. The researcher discusses how these theories work together to answer the research questions.

This study is based on a Baudrillardian-Lacanian reading of *The Bluest Eye* with a major focus on the damaging effect of white-defined advertising on African-Americans, in particular, on the most vulnerable member of society, who is continually exposed to and hunted by white-defined advertisements. These advertisements with the promise of 'the blue eyes' on the candy wrapper, cup... defined new false desires for Pecola. Advertising is an object-cause desire that creates a lack, i.e., a desire for blue eyes, and entails a promise to satisfy it.

3. Discussion

In the preface to *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison explains that the aspiration for writing the novel is a conversation with a black childhood friend who had been praying for blue eyes. Morrison asks why her friend had such self-hatred feelings, "how one learns that. Who told her?" (Morrison, 1999, p. XI) Similarly, Pecola, the main character, sits looking in the mirror for long hours and tries "to discover the secret of" her "ugliness" (45). The answer to Morrison's question and the secret to Pecola's ugliness is 'advertising.' The



social life is peppered with and dominated by images produced by photography, film, and advertising. Advertising produces images. As Baudrillard puts it "we experience the world through the many images that confront us every day" (Deal and Beal, 2004, p. 52-53). White-defined beauty advertising created images of the perfect white body and ignored natural black characteristics such as skin color, facial features, and hair.

The Bluest Eye is filled with an influx of damaging white-defined beauty advertisements. This novel tells the story of a young African American woman who is exposed to advertising for white cosmetics. At the very beginning of *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, Toni Morrison quotes a paragraph of the Reader 'Dick and Jane' that represents an ideal white family of middle class. The Reader was used in classrooms in the United States and in other English-speaking countries at that time. Referring to the authentic Reader 'Dick and Jane' in the 1960s, it is seen that human images depicted in it are all white. Although the Reader, which merely includes white characters, does not directly advertise white-defined beauty standards, it sets the stage for the existing and coming white-defined beauty advertising and help preparing kids to accept white-defined beauty standards passively and innocently. The stories in 'Dick and Jane' include just 'white bread' stories and do not offer the kids of color the black role models and heroes who look like them. They cannot identify with the characters and see themselves represented in the school books they read. The Reader merely depicts white human images and affects the minds of students. The presented white human images have power in constructing the black kids' desires for possessing white-defined beauty features such as white skin, blue eyes, etc.

Morrison employs the paragraph of the Reader and goes on to make changes to it. The changes she made may be interpreted as how black Pecola, the most vulnerable member of the African American community, reads a school text peppered with white human images. Due to the lack of black human images in the Reader, Pecola cannot identify with the characters that do not look like her. Employing the Reader 'Dick and Jane' three times- first well-structured paragraph, second without punctuation, and third without spaces between the words and without punctuation- Morrison displays how white-defined images affect Pecola. From the very beginning of her life Pecola learns to read through white human images in printed texts. Although 'Dick and Jane' primers cannot be considered as an advertisement, it set the stage for and supports the existing and coming white-defined beauty advertisements exposed to the most vulnerable member of the African-American community. Pecola compares her eyes to the white characters in "Alice-and-Jerry's Storybook," as the novel says (Morrison, 1999, p.201).

According to Baudrillard, in a simulation society, standards are created from image production tools. In this new social order, images define what is considered the ideal body. The main character, Pecola, is bombarded by merely white-defined beauty advertisements; this makes the most vulnerable member of the African-American community invisible. Pecola consumes and is influenced by white beauty ideals advertised through images such as those on candy wrappers and cups or through objects such as children's dolls. The candy was pictured in the book with a pale wrapper that included a picture of young Mary Jane, after whom the candy was named. Morrison describes Mary Jane as having a white face and blond hair. To emphasize the power of advertising, as Baudrillard says, "the notions of the perfect body" ... "come about" in large part "through all the body images projected by media, advertising and other instruments of image production" (Deal and Beal, 2004, p. 52). Due to the effect and power of white-defined advertising, Pecola, "standing before the counter," decides to buy just Mary Jane after looking "at the array of candies"(Morrison, 1999, p. 48). The function of the wrapper of Mary Jane candy is to define and advertise the standard of the perfect body and create a desire to possess white-defined beauty standards. The satisfaction of desire is not possible through real or natural objects but only through objects - causes of desire, which embody the lack and



promise to fill it (Stavrakakis, 2006, p. 90). Advertisement incarnates the lack and entails a promise of dealing with it. Baudrillard "saw the symbolic value of the object [...] and concluded that the object image in the advertisements was played with, and fundamental purpose was to deceive, arouse desire and cover" (Qin, 2020, p. 381). According to Lacan, the need is replaced by the demand as language develops because it creates a specific relationship between the self and the other. In other words, demand already shapes the other (2006, p. 580). The other in the novel is the white-defined beauty advertising. This other is of the "'privilege' of satisfying needs"(580). White beauty advertising has control over Pecola because of her vulnerability coupled with, as Morrison says, uncaring parents, adult rejection, and a world that reinforces desperation (Morrison, 1999, p. X). She believes nothing but white-defined beauty advertisements to satisfy her demand to have blue eyes. When Frieda brought her some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup, Pecola drank from it constantly (19). Shirley Temple was a 1930s child actress who was described as "American's Little Darling." It is another white-defined beauty advertisement in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola's need for milk is a demand for love. Drinking milk, to use Lacan's terms is not a sign of hunger but a sign of love (580). The purpose of the image of Shirley Temple, this white-defined beauty advertisement on the cup, is to arouse people's desire. This desire is never fully satisfied, even after drinking three quarts of milk. She spent a long time with the milk, gazing lovingly at Shirley Temple. Milk does not function as a signal of a need; it is a sign of the desire to possess white-defined beauty standards.

Advertising creates desires and turns these desires into needs. Advertisements like Mary Jane's picture on a candy wrapper or Shirley Temple's picture on a cup create a lack, i.e., a desire for blue eyes and being pretty, and entail a promise to satisfy it. Advertising by producing icons and images fills the world with its 'desirable mythologies' and promotes hope. This hope supports advertising (Stravakakis, 2006, p. 92). As Pecola says, "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (Morrison, 1999, p. 50). Things that are impossible to achieve in reality can be accomplished, in Baudrillard's words, through the simulacra presented in advertisements on radio, television, newspapers, magazines, banners, etc. (Dukut, 2006, p. 43). The function of advertising is to cultivate and interpret desire. Additionally, the way that consumers behave is greatly influenced by these desire-inspiring images. Even after drinking three quarts of milk, Pecola's desire does not vanish, or when she stands before the counter and looks at the array of candies, "All Mary Jane, she decides" (Morrison, 1999, p. 48).

Advertising is designed to seduce and persuade us to consume the image that has replaced the thing it represents, 'simulacra'. People desire to believe in the simulacrum (Deal and Beal, 2004, p.52). The novel also features a white doll advertisement that promotes white beauty. A doll with big blue eyes has always been a unique and loving gift (Morrison, 1999, p. 20). The author then states that white-defined beauty advertisements, such as a white baby doll with blue eyes and yellow hair, are promoted and accepted by "adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs" (20). Eye-catching white-defined beauty advertising controls Pecola. It plays a very important role in her life, so much so that Pecola's desire for blue eyes has become a real and natural need.

Moreover, another hope implied in an advertisement is the promise to make one's life easier and better. Instead of real needs, consumers follow aroused desires by advertisements that entail a promise of satisfaction. When Pecola buys Mary Jane the candy, she is drawn to Mary Jane's smiling white face, blonde hair, and blue eyes that look at her from "a world of clean comfort" (50). "A world of clean comfort" illustrates that Pecola believes if she possesses these white's features such as white face and blond hair, her life would be much better, happier. She prayed for blue eyes every night. "Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope" (46). Advertisements support and maintain this hope. Advertisements turn Pecola's desire for blue eyes into need. Pecola thinks that if she was beautiful, Cholly and Breedlove's behavior would be different.



The influence of advertising in contemporary society is profound, as it transforms mere desires into perceived necessities. A compelling advertising campaign convinces consumers that the product being promoted has the potential to enhance their lives, whether through increased happiness, elevated social standing, fulfillment of personal aspirations, or a sense of safety and security. Through strategic messaging, advertising not only captures attention but also shapes consumer perceptions and behaviors. By presenting products as solutions to various life challenges, effective advertisements create a narrative that resonates with individuals, ultimately leading them to believe that acquiring these products is essential for their well-being and satisfaction. According to Lacan, advertising creates false desires. And Baudrillard indicates that images in advertisements promote hope. Advertisements, which entail a promise of satisfaction, produce an image of the perfect body and affect consumer behavior. Advertising is an object-cause desire that creates a lack, i.e., a desire for the blue eyes and entails a promise to satisfy it.

4. Conclusion

This paper explored the detrimental impact of beauty advertising defined by white standards on African Americans, particularly focusing on the most vulnerable individuals within this demographic who are persistently subjected to such advertisements. The analysis centered on Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, illustrating the harmful consequences of these beauty ideals on the African American community. Furthermore, the research addressed the concept of simulation, where artificially constructed images replace authentic experiences. By employing a Baudrillardian-Lacanian framework, the study examined advertisements that offer blue eyes as a representation of Pecola's aspirations. Consumers like Pecola, being immersed in a world dominated by consumerist symbols derived from advertising, pursued products to conform to constructed ideals, not out of necessity. This investigation underscored the importance of challenging the restrictive beauty standards perpetuated by advertising and advocated for the reconstruction of ideals that celebrate diversity and authenticity. The study urged black image creators to dismantle these white-centric beauty norms and to foster standards that honor black beauty, encouraging individuals to appreciate their natural attributes instead of succumbing to external pressures.

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