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"You Don't Know You're Beautiful"—One Direction, 2011

Beauty is not skin deep or feature wide, but encompasses a Black woman's feelings about herself, her carriage, her style, and her heritage. True Black beauty is a synthesis between physical and personality attributes.[1]

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The only beauty that matters is inner beauty. Such phrases and ideas have long become cliché, but it is because they are steeped in truth. The essence of beauty is that it is subjective; an individual must decide what to consider as beautiful. This fact necessitates the dominance of internal beauty over external beauty. External beauty, to an extent, cannot be changed. A person is born with a specific color of skin or eyes, distinct nose shape, or unique body type. Physical features are usually a result of genetics or accidents and cannot be easily altered (with the exception, of course, of extreme surgery or artifice). External beauty is often a social construct: what a society accepts as standards of attractiveness or worth. Without a doubt, such a construct is dangerous given the wide variety of physical appearances and personal tastes. Internal beauty, on the other hand, can be molded, nurtured, and adapted. Inner beauty—the intangible qualities that make a person likeable—consists of character, grit, intelligence, compassion, communicative capabilities, and the ability to connect. Literature often

[1] Angela M. Neal and Midge L. Wilson. "The Role of Skin Color and Features in the Black Community: Implications for Black Women and Therapy." *Clinical Psychology Review*, 1989, pp. 323-33.

depicts the struggle between internal and external beauty, especially for female characters. For black female characters, the struggle can become oppressive. Two African American female novelists have addressed the concept of beauty in their poignant works. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* feature black female protagonists who encounter rigid definitions of external beauty that do not suit their individual selves. In their novels, both Hurston and Morrison represent a struggle between internal and external beauty, its effects on self-worth, and the potential damage or enlightenment it can bring to a person's life.

In both books, the standard of physical beauty is defined as being as close to whiteness as possible: light skin, light eyes, long soft or straight hair. Images of baby dolls occur in each book. Characters such as Pecola, Pauline, Geraldine, Maureen, Mrs. Turner, and Joe Starks clearly prefer this definition to any other, while characters like Claudia and Janie reject the idea that beauty is limited to external representations of white values and ideals. Internal beauty, while also present in both works, is not as clearly defined, but is proven to be more crucial to the success of characters. Characters who exemplify inner beauty are those who find beauty in others, who value human connection, who are sympathetic, and who define life in their own terms. They reject human ugliness and succeed in persevering against it, surviving and growing. It is clear that Hurston and Morrison wish to redefine beauty—to move away from the visual system of physical beauty and to focus on the more significant and powerful forms of beauty which are felt or experienced, not seen. Morrison offers a succinct version of what authentic beauty is in her article, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib." She rejects the pretty image of Nefertiti in favor of "useful women" who are "already O.K. O.K. with [their]

short necks. O.K. with [their] callused hands. O.K. with [their] tired feet…" (Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks"). Similarly, Hurston's portrayal of Janie focuses less on her appearance and more on her sensuality and humanness, her beautiful usefulness and authenticity.

External beauty is defined in depth in Morrison's *Bluest Eye* as being predicated on whiteness. This very idea that beauty is only white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes—the Shirley Temple, baby doll look—torments the protagonist, twelve-year-old Pecola. Pecola, a dark-skinned child who is told and shown again and again that she is ugly, prays for the blue eyes of the beloved baby dolls that she sees. The definition of white beauty is thrust upon her from every angle: baby dolls, movie stars, candy wrappers, white families in her Ohio town, school mates like Maureen Peal, and the "Dick and Jane" reading primer. Pecola is taught and frequently reminded that she does not fit this definition of external beauty. Deemed ugly by her mother at birth, Pecola watches Pauline as she idolizes and adores the pink-skinned Fisher child for whom she is care giver. Through Pauline, Morrison traces the roots of the white beauty ideal to film. Enraptured by the movies and their white film stars, Pauline attempts to fashion herself like them. But after losing a tooth, she gives up *trying to look beautiful* and resigns herself to a life of ugliness that she transfers onto baby Pecola. In Hurston's *Their Eyes*, external beauty is not defined so extensively, but the novel's characters subscribe to the white beauty ideal just the same. The main character, Janie, is described as having long, thick hair and creamy, coffee-colored skin. Although these features are due to two generations of rape by white men, Janie is viewed as especially beautiful by her husbands, the townspeople of Eatonville, and the Everglades community.

In both novels, there is also a presence of characters who possess and attempt to define internal beauty. Claudia and Janie are both very sensual and at times reject the confines of the socially-invented image of beauty. Claudia, the nine-year-old narrator of *Bluest Eye*, is candid about her ill feelings toward white baby dolls (more accurately, white girls) and all that they represent. She is reflective, curious, compassionate toward Pecola, and finds beauty in Pecola and in life. Her idea of beauty is intensely sensual: "I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted rather…the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music…to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach" (Morrison 21-22). Janie, in *Their Eyes*, experiences the beauty of nature and springtime from a young age. Escaping chores into the backyard, she soaks in "the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze" (Hurston 15). While appreciating her own physical beauty, especially her hair, Janie is far more concerned with the beauty of feeling, experience, relationships, and loving herself. Other characters demonstrate their inner beauty, too. Frieda's courage and confidence, Miss Marie's independence and self-assuredness, and even the male character Tea Cake's *joie de vivre* and youthful silliness are notable.

Therein lies the biggest difference of the two novels: the pervasiveness of external (white) beauty versus internal beauty elements found in their pages. In Morrison's *Bluest Eye*, the story is literally framed with the reading primer "Dick and Jane" and its imagery of white values and dynamics. It is a world that is "middle-class, secure, suburban and white, replete with dog, cat, non-working mother and leisure-time father (Klotman 123). This world confronts Pecola from the beginning of her life both from school and home. Pecola believes she is ugly because of her dark skin and eyes. She cannot learn otherwise; as she experiences her parents'

mistreatment of her, she watches teachers and other adults value and adore white baby dolls and Shirley Temples. Her mother, Pauline, does not love her own family, but worships the white Fisher family for whom she works. She loves and respects their child as she simultaneously beats her own child to the floor. Morrison provides much background on the history of the white image of beauty among the book's characters. She divulges Pauline's preoccupation with the movies, where she learns of physical beauty. Pauline equates "physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap" (Morrison 122). She longs to look like Jean Harlow, but after she loses a tooth, there is no hope to be beautiful. Her resignation to physical ugliness leads to internal ugliness and, in her mind, loss of virtue. She slips into self-hating after losing that tooth, and transfers the hate to her children. As Pecola is born and nursing properly, Pauline says she was "a right smart baby…but Lord she was ugly" (126). Apart from her mother, Pecola is reminded of her physical ugliness during her encounter with Geraldine. Geraldine, the "pretty milk-brown lady" from Mobile, regards Pecola as the kind of girl she had seen her whole life:

> …the dirty, torn dress, the plaits sticking out of her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up. (91)

Geraldine then compares Pecola to a hovering fly before calling her a "nasty little black bitch" (92). Even in the face of tragedy, Pecola's ugliness is at the foreground of conversation. Discussing her pregnancy, the people of Pecola's community feel no pity for her being raped by her father. Instead, they conjecture that the baby is "bound to be the ugliest thing walking" and

conclude that there should be a law that prevents "two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly" (189-190). Pecola "has learned about herself from school, from her peers, from her family and the world around her is that she is black, poor, and ugly, the antithesis of all that the society values" (Klotman 124).

Curiously, Hurston's protagonist Janie is assigned several white-female standards of beauty. While there is some emphasis on her white features throughout the book, it is not nearly as prevalent as whiteness is portrayed in *Bluest Eye*. Janie is described as having "firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; [a] great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; [and] pugnacious breasts" (Hurston 5). She has a "coffee-and-cream complexion and …luxurious hair" (168). Janie's looks attract her second husband, Jody Starks, who simultaneously calls her a "pretty doll-baby" and, out of jealousy, forces her to keep her hair tied up in a scarf when she works their general store (36). Her hair also intrigues her third husband, Tea Cake. It later attracts the attention of Mrs. Turner, a neighbor in the Everglades who would prefer if she and Janie could "class off" or at least "make…a class tuh ourselves" (169-170). In fact, it seems that the community "attempts to place her, because of her features (particularly her hair) on a social level that is above and apart from the community. In Janie, Hurston creates a character who subverts the 'history of differential treatment'" (Ashe). Janie struggles against the differential treatment brought on by her appearance, as she longs to be connected with the Eatonville community, join in the porch talks, and work in the muck of the Everglades.

As various characters in Hurston's and Morrison's works toil against the presence of a white beauty ideal, there are touching examples of characters who exhibit a sense of beauty from

within, who reject or at least disagree with the one-sided opinion that physical beauty means white beauty. Claudia fervently reacts against the image of white, blue-eyed baby dolls so lovingly granted to her as gifts. As she notes that "all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed-yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured," Claudia is revolted by them and seeks to destroy them (Morrison 20). While not necessarily a beautiful trait of hers, the anger Claudia feels toward the differential treatment of girls with white versus black skin is righteous and her unapologetic, honest attitude is admirable. Claudia exemplifies internal beauty mainly through her cogent, thoughtful, and articulate adult-narrator voice. She is "singled out as the MacTeer sister blessed with Imagination" (Malmgren 55). She tries her nine-year-old best to help defend the defenseless Pecola. Along with her sister, Frieda, Claudia measures the value of herself and others not by physical beauty, but by character. As she reflects upon her experience with Maureen Peal, the "high yellow dream child with long brown hair," Claudia again rejects the physical standard by which she, Frieda, and Pecola are measured by adults (Morrison 62):

> We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our own skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. (74)

Claudia is entirely self-affirmed and in love with sensuality, life, and experience. Even in the midst of adults telling her she is "less than" light-skinned girls, she values her own inner beauty

as well as the courage she sees in her sister and the beauty she imagines in Pecola's unborn baby: the "great O's of wool, the black face, holding…two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin" (190). She may be the only character who finds beauty in Pecola, as she notes that Pecola's smile, so rare, surprises her with pleasure (106).

Hurston also creates a character rife with inner beauty. As discussed earlier, Janie is described as beautiful in white-standard terms, and her physical beauty sets her apart from her community more than once. But Janie's determination to find and love herself, her own identity apart from her appearance, showcases her internal beauty. Janie's appearance is a vital component in her longest-lasting marriage with Jody Starks. Jody is "determined to force Janie to acknowledge her 'difference'" and to keep her separate from the Eatonville folk (Ashe). The marital conflict over the position that Jody thinks Janie should occupy eventually causes her to shrink inside herself. But, as Jody is on his death bed, Janie releases herself from the stymied relationship and pulls down her scarf to take "careful stock of herself" and "the weight, the length, the glory" of her hair (Hurston 106). She is happy with the woman she sees in the mirror, even though it is no longer a girl's reflection. In the weeks following Jody's death, Janie finds the other beautiful parts of herself as she learns how to live alone, run the store, and relish in a younger man's attention. She is able to join the Eatonville community as herself, rather than as the mayor's wife. Later, after Janie moves to the muck with Tea Cake, she is confronted again about her physical qualities by a neighbor, Mrs. Turner. She attempts to get Janie to join her in the idea that they are superior to other blacks because of their white features and tries to convince her to "class off" (169). Janie's reaction to Mrs. Turner demonstrates how little value

Janie places on physical beauty, especially as it relates to having white features. She acknowledges and appreciates that "we'se uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks" (169). She admits to the joy brought to her by fraternizing with her black neighbors, how "they tickles [her] wid they talk" (168). Janie "happens to possess the physical attributes of white-female beauty, but they aren't important to her" (Ashe). For Janie, having a sense of self and community, love, and happiness are the true qualities of a beautiful person.

The struggle of identifying internal or external beauty, or the absence of it, has a direct connection to self-esteem in both novels. Most painfully, Pecola bases her self-worth almost entirely on physical beauty. Sadly, she is fixated on and consumed by an image of beauty she will never be able to attain herself. Pecola wishes to be Shirly Temple and prays for blue eyes. Her determination to become something impossible overcomes her whole self. At times, she imagines that she can disappear. The thought of her ugliness consumes her: "long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness…as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people" (Morrison 45). Without hope for escape, Pecola has no hope for finding value within herself. Unable to find beauty in her exterior, she is incapable of finding beauty within. Contributing to her self-image issue is her family. No beauty within themselves, Pauline, Cholly, and even Sammy are stuck in self-loathing that prevents them from nurturing any form of love. There is no love for Pecola's broken spirit, to help beautify her inside when her outside is abused. The closest Pecola comes to experiencing appreciation and care is from near strangers; the prostitutes in the nearby apartment and the MacTeer family provide some semblance of interest in her. Her wish for a new set of eyes persists, though, until

she is granted them by Soaphead Church. By then, there is no saving her sense of self; she is driven mad, "the damage done was total" (204).

Hurston's Janie, on the other hand, is an exemplar of self-esteem and self-worth, though it is not clear if her physical beauty is a contributing factor to her self-discovery. Her appearance helps and hinders Janie in her experiences, and her hair particularly plays a major role throughout the book. Janie's sense of self begins in a very sensual way, as she witnesses a bee pollinating a bloom and discovers the sweet promise of "marriage." She tries, unsuccessfully, to fulfill her yearning for passion in her first marriage to Logan Killicks. She is unsatisfied because she realizes this marriage does not marry with her inner self—the self who "wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (Hurston 31). Janie's physical beauty attracts her second husband, the "cityified, stylish" Jody Starks (34). It is during this marriage that Janie's self-esteem is most affected. Jody is controlling and jealous of Janie's white-beauty looks. He claims that he wants her to sit up high, away from the town folk of Eatonville. When Janie shows interest in speaking to the town's inhabitants, Jody shuts her down as not knowing "nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'," the first of several little blows to her self-esteem (53). Jody forces Janie to cover her long, beautiful hair while working his general store. "The business of the head-rag irked [her] endlessly," but Janie complies (66). Another little blow. Jody continues to diminish Janie's self-esteem and dim her inner beauty. He persistently thwarts Janie's attempts to connect with the townspeople on the store porch. Her passionate, springtime-self starts to wane as "the spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and…she wasn't petal-open anymore" with Jody (86). Eventually, after the first physical beating, "something fell off the shelf inside" Janie, where the glistening pollen and fruit used to

be (87). Though approaching middle age, Janie still has her looks about her, but that does little for her self-esteem in her stifling, sad marriage to Jody. Once Jody is on his death bed, Janie is able to reclaim some of her self-worth. She tells him how she's "just tryin' tuh make [him] know what kinda person [she] is" and how he "done lived wid [her] for twenty years and don't half know [her] atall" (104). After he dies, Janie is able to reconnect with herself in the mirror. Her youth is gone, but she is satisfied to see herself and happily yanks off her head scarf to gaze upon her hair. For the remainder of the book, Janie focuses on herself, learning to love the freedom of being single, and loving what it is like to love Tea Cake. Though the relationship is brief, Janie's time with Tea Cake is where she is able to relocate the beautiful, passionate parts of herself that bring her such joy. Though she experiences great tragedy with Tea Cake's death, Janie ends her tale more self-assured and at peace than ever. As she enters her bedroom alone, she notices how "the place tasted fresh again…the wind through the open windows had broomed out all the fetid feeling of absence and nothingness…here was peace" (231).

Morrison's and Hurston's examinations of beauty and self-worth have taught us that finding one's own beauty is crucial to survival, but the search is made evermore difficult when contending with the imposition another's idea of beauty. They both demonstrate the imperativeness of resisting the internalization of outside constructs of beauty. In Morrison's novel we witness the death of a child's spirit and sanity, the child powerless to help it and her society unable to help the child. Unfortunately, as Janie says at the end of *Their Eyes*: "Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (Hurston 230). Pecola "fails to discover a true self precisely because she allows her values to be

dictated by the white mythology" (Powell 752). Pecola had no inner resources to find out for herself how beautiful she was. She relied on the entities around her to teach her. But "whether one learns acceptability from the formal educational experience or from cultural symbols, the effect is the same: self-hatred," and so Pecola is left hating herself into madness (Klotman 124). On the other hand, characters like Janie and Claudia are able to discover and stay true to what they know is beautiful: the spirit inside.

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