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Affective Circles and Cruel Optimism: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as A Critique of Intersectional Oppression

Abstract

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) examines the intersections of race, gender, and class through affect theory, focusing on Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism. The novel's characters, caught in "affective circles" of shame, hate, and futile hope, pursue desires for beauty and belonging that hinder their flourishing, perpetuating trauma and exclusion. Drawing on Berlant's framework and Sara Ahmed's theories of happiness scripts and affective economies, this analysis explores how racialized beauty standards and gender norms generate contagious affects, evident in Pecola Breedlove's longing for blue eyes, which reflects internalized racism. Morrison's narrative style, with multiple narrators and fragmented timelines, amplifies these emotional dynamics, inviting ethical engagement with the text's critique of white supremacy. By applying affect theory to scenes of violence, alienation, and resistance, this study highlights the novel's relevance to contemporary Black women's struggles, urging a reevaluation of literature's role in fostering empathy. *The Bluest Eye* serves as a transformative tool for critiquing societal norms that tie individuals to destructive fantasies of the "good life."

[The English Extended Abstract is available at the end of the article.]

Keywords: affective circles, cruel optimism, racialized beauty, internalized racism, ethical empathy.



Duygusal Döngüler ve Zalim İyimsenlik: Toni Morrison'ın *The Bluest Eye* Romanında Kesişimsel Baskının Eleştirisi

Öz

Toni Morrison'ın *The Bluest Eye* (1970) adlı eseri, Lauren Berlant'ın acımasız iyimsenlik kavramına odaklanarak, duygu teorisi aracılığıyla ırk, cinsiyet ve sınıfın kesişim noktalarını inceler. Romanın karakterleri, utanç, nefret ve boş umutların "duygusal döngüleri" içinde sıkışıp kalmış, güzellik ve aidiyet arzularının peşinden koşarken, bu arzuların gelişmelerini engellediğini, travma ve dışlanmayı sürdürdüğünü fark ederler. Berlant'ın çerçevesi ve Sara Ahmed'in mutluluk senaryoları ve duygusal ekonomiler teorilerinden yararlanarak, bu analiz, ırksal güzellik standartlarının ve cinsiyet normlarının, Pecola Breedlove'un içselleştirilmiş ırkçılığı yansıtan mavi gözlere olan özleminde görüldüğü gibi, nasıl bulaşıcı duygular yarattığını araştırıyor. Morrison'ın çoklu anlatıcılar ve parçalı zaman çizelgeleri içeren anlatım

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tarzı, bu duygusal dinamikleri güçlendirerek, metnin beyaz üstünlüğüne yönelik eleştirisiyle etik bir etkileşime davet ediyor. Bu çalışma, duygu teorisini şiddet, yabancılaşma ve direniş sahnelerine uygulayarak, romanın çağdaş siyah kadınların mücadeleleriyle olan ilgisini vurgulamakta ve empatiyi teşvik etmede edebiyatın rolünün yeniden değerlendirilmesini teşvik etmektedir. *The Bluest Eye*, bireyleri “iyi yaşam”ın yıkıcı fantezilerine bağlayan toplumsal normları eleştirmek için dönüştürücü bir araç görevi görmektedir.

Keywords: zalim iyimserlik, duygulanım teorisi, ırksal güzellik, içselleştirilmiş ırkçılık, kesişimsel baskı.



Introduction

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison begins with a reframed primer from a children's book: “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty.” This version of an imaginatively illustrated house, repeated and staggered throughout the text, offers a sharp contrast to the brutal realities faced by Morrison's novels' black characters in Lorain, Ohio in the 1940s and vividly reminds readers of the cruel difference between white normative ideals and the very real lived experience of racialized others. The novel tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old black girl who hopes and dreams of being beautiful by wishing for blue eyes. Pecola's wish takes root in her black imagination and she ends up praying for her blue eyes to transform her ugliness and the abuse that was bestowed on her. In telling the story of Pecola, Morrison employs Claudia MacTeer and a more omniscient voice which allows the reader to see how Pecola's family and community are ensnared in their own trauma, including her parents Cholly and Pauline, whose rejection and violence are deeply personal.

Using affect theory, this study investigates how Morrison represents emotions as relational capacities of social structures that enable or disable action and identity, as opposed to individual phenomena. To develop its analysis, this study relies on Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, wherein cruel optimism is defined as attachment to an object of desire or fantasy, like happiness by way of assimilation or beauty, and this attachment becomes detrimental to the subject's well-being.¹ Each character in *The Bluest Eye* works toward racial acceptance, gender conformity, and social ordinariness based on their emerging attachments to the objects of desire, which frequently takes shape through “affective circles”: social circulations of shame, anger, and hate transferring between bodies that reinforce oppression. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, which views gender roles as “happiness scripts” promising fulfillment through normativity, this analysis highlights how these scripts intersect with racial hierarchies to alienate strangers like Pecola.² Recent discussions of marginalized perspectives that encompass intersecting oppressions in Morrison's work assist in expanding and understanding these communal dynamics in recreating self-abhorrence and fragmenting belonging.

Building on Sven Blehner's application of affect theory to literature, where affects are “sticky, contagious, and potentially socially determined,” this study extends his insights from Sylvia Plath to Morrison, emphasizing pre-personal affects that precede language and consciousness.³ Morrison herself thought of her writing as an opportunity to generate meaningful feelings upon readers, whereby it develops against the “death of the author” by authorizing the text as a participating

¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

² Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 59.

³ Sven Blehner, “Using Affect Theory for Studying Literature: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*,” (master's thesis, University of Tartu, 2019), 26.

emotional space. By focusing on characters' emotional motivations over purely textual elements, as Jerome Bump advocates for ethical emotive criticism, the article combines intra-textual analysis with readerly empathy to uncover Morrison's critique of systemic violence. Bump summarizes this as Morrison's text makes a form of "ethical emotive criticism."⁴ In other words, the reader has the capacity to feel the pain of Pecola, thus creating a situation of self-reflection on the everyday affective economies that promote systemic violence. Similarly, contemporary readings of *The Bluest Eye* in trauma studies demonstrate how rather than merely embodying experiences of personal self-loathing, the character Pecola embodies cumulative psychosocial harm through a life of everyday racialized trauma.⁵

While previous studies from scholars such as Harris⁶, Christian⁷ and Goyal⁸ have examined *The Bluest Eye* through the lenses of trauma, race, and gender few have explicitly mapped the novel's emotional dynamics through the concept of 'affective circles,' a framework introduced in this study to extend Berlant's notion of cruel optimism. This analysis builds on longstanding critical conversations in Morrison scholarship, such as Wall's exploration of narrative fragmentation as a reflection of emotional instability⁹, Bump's ethical emotive criticism¹⁰, and Williams's focus on Black women's trauma under systemic racism¹¹, while shifting emphasis toward impersonal atmospheric intensities rather than individualized psychology.

The organization of the discussion is as follows: First, the theoretical framework will delineate key concepts from Berlant, Ahmed, and other scholars. Second, it will analyze cruel optimism in relation to gender and social norms. Third, a close character analysis will apply these theoretical lenses to Pecola, Cholly, Pauline, and Claudia, analyzing the affective transferences in important scenes. Lastly, it will situate the implications of these frameworks to synthesize how Morrison's novel reclaims space away from white supremacy and requires the reader to enact an affective intervention in literary interpretation. Through this, *The Bluest Eye* emerges not just as a historical artifact but as a vital intervention in ongoing discourses on race, gender, and emotional resilience. While previous studies have examined *The Bluest Eye* through the lenses of trauma, race, and gender, few have explicitly mapped the novel's emotional dynamics through the concept of 'affective circles,' a framework introduced in this study to extend Berlant's notion of cruel optimism.

Affective Foundations: Theorizing Cruel Optimism and Emotional Cycles

Affect theory opens a space to think about affects; not as discrete psychological states or named emotions, but as pre-personal, pre-linguistic intensities, as identified by Massumi, that circulate impersonally within social, cultural, and historical contexts, influencing capacities for action before conscious thought or linguistic capture.¹² As articulated by Tomkins and Sedgwick, these intensities

⁴ Jerome Bump, "Racism and Appearance in *The Bluest Eye*: A Template for an Ethical Emotive Criticism," *College Literature* 37, no. 2 (2010): 150.

⁵ Howard Lipke, "Trauma and World Literature: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison" (International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, 2019).

⁶ Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

⁷ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

⁸ Yogita Goyal, "The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and *The Bluest Eye*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 60, no. 3 (2014): 518-43, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2014.0042>

⁹ Cheryl A. Wall, "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: A Study in Narrative Strategy," *African American Review* 47, no. 1 (2014): 11-24.

¹⁰ Jerome Bump, "Racism and Appearance in *The Bluest Eye*: A Template for an Ethical Emotive Criticism," *College Literature* 37, no. 2 (2010): 147-70.

¹¹ Rhaisa Kameela Williams, "Toward a Black Feminist Sense of Something: *The Bluest Eye* and the Work of Black Women's Trauma," in *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 108-22.

¹² Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 27-28.

resist psychologization, focusing instead on bodily resonances and atmospheric forces rather than moral evaluations of inner feelings.¹³

At the heart of this study is Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism. Her notion of cruel optimism describes attachments to objects or fantasies, such as love, beauty or social acceptance, that are at once conducive to flourishing and also obstruct it; therefore, these attachments are relational and emerge from atmospheres of shared experiences.¹⁴ Such attachments arise through the circulation of affective forces such as hope or shame, and help shape a collective judgment.¹⁵ In *The Bluest Eye*, characters strive for normative ideals (white beauty or stable family roles) and that endeavor shows cruel optimism, in which the promise of 'normal' denotes belonging but ultimately produces alienation or trauma. Sara Ahmed complements this by framing gender and social roles as "happiness scripts," prescriptive paths that promise joy through conformity but often result in disappointment or exclusion when followed.¹⁶ Ahmed's notion of affective economies, where emotions like hate or shame stick to certain bodies like racialized others further displays how Morrison's characters are trapped in cycles of emotional transfer.¹⁷

In moving through these frameworks, this paper introduces the concept of "affective circles" to describe the cyclical and contagious emotional dynamics that perpetuate oppression in *The Bluest Eye*. An affective circle is a relational feedback loop where socially conditioned emotions like shame, hate, or anger travel from body to body and through the community, perpetuating the same systemic norms that caused these emotions in the first place. For example, when Pauline experiences shame about her own racial and economic status, she inadvertently transfers this shame into her daughter Pecola. Pecola's own perceived ugliness, in turn, becomes a point of communal rejection, completing a circuit of affective violence. In a way, affective circles provide a concrete mechanism to trace how systemic forces become intimate lived experiences.

An affective circle is a relational feedback loop where impersonal intensities—such as the atmospheric resonances of shame or disgust—circulate pre-verbally between bodies and communities, perpetuating systemic norms before they are named as emotions or morally judged.¹⁸ The notion of "affective circles" is presented to articulate the difficulties of disentangling these circular, contagious emotional dynamics in *The Bluest Eye*. Affect, according to Blehner, is "sticky, contagious, and socially determined", and they are movements and sensations that can be mapped between bodies, and get us moving and doing before we know we are doing it.¹⁹ A good example is when Pecola's shame in her perceived ugliness connects to Claudia's anger and perpetuates mutual non-acceptance, or affective violence, into a circular feedback loop. While Claudia notes; "Shame," Melissa V. Harris-Perry's recent scholarship on shame in Black women's lived experiences frames in a way similar to Claudia's and Pecola's shared affect and how shame and similar emotions are not simply personal but socialized as a result of colonial legacies and the social constructs of systems of racism and sexism making their impact even more traumatic and destructible in Morrison's work.²⁰ Cheryl Wall's work on Morrison's writing discusses how the fragmented style of her writing mirrors these affective and disruptive sentiments and encourages readers to experience the instability and tenderness of characters'

¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 17–35; Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, vol. 1 (New York: Springer, 1962), 243–65.

¹⁴ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

¹⁵ Berlant, 13–15.

¹⁶ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 59.

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39.

¹⁸ Sven Blehner, "Using Affect Theory for Studying Literature: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," 12–15

¹⁹ Blehner, "Using Affect Theory," 26.

²⁰ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 104–30.

emotional worlds.²¹ This is also aligned with psychosocial readings of the novel that attribute Pecola's ultimate psychological collapse to the array of intersecting practices of abuse, cultural commentary surrounding beauty, and systemic racism, profoundly trailing Pecola's affective world from a broader cultural trauma.²²

Morrison's specific authorial intent also reinforces this affective paradigm. Refusing to adopt Roland Barthes' "death of the author" mind-set, she insists that literature exists to elicit "deep feelings" from the reader, and sees any literary text as a participatory experience, which brings together both emotional and cultural meanings.²³ This coincides with Blehner when she writes that "affect and language are sewn tightly together" in literature, which also represents the cultural environments in which the text was produced.²⁴ By combining affect theory with close readings, this study reveals how Morrison uses emotions to critique the oppressive structures of race, gender, and class, offering insights into both the characters' motivations and the reader's ethical engagement with their suffering.

Cruel Optimism in Social and Gender Norms

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison demonstrates how social and gender norms act as happiness scripts that both promise happiness through formality, but in doing so perpetuate forms of racial and gendered oppression through cruel optimism. To speak of scripts of happiness, as Sara Ahmed explains, is to refer to the scripts or manuals provided by society that give instructions on how to find happiness or how to have a joyful life for example by acting according to gender roles established social norms to achieve social acceptance. However, that will prove to be alienating because adhering to the script of happiness may be impossible, as it itself is the epitome of an exclusionary project.²⁵ In the case of Morrison's characters, the scripts of happiness are scripted by white supremacist and patriarchal values at play in 1940s America, where beauty, family preservation, and cultural normalcy are all defined by unattainable white ideals. The idea of cruel optimism by Lauren Berlant helps to illustrate how these normative projects, rather than helping characters to flourish, bind the characters to cycles of shame, hate, and despair.²⁶ This section will focus on how normative, social, and gender scripts in the text work affectively forming emotions that circulate between people and communities, while reinforcing systematic forms of exclusion and internally suggested inferiority.

Gender norms in the novel present fixed roles that promise to lead to happiness through conformity but often lead to disappointment, especially for Black women. Ahmed claims gender norms function like "straightening devices" that help individuals align with what is expected of them by society so that they can achieve the "good life."²⁷ In Pauline Breedlove's case, this meant achieving her perception of normalcy as a nurturing, respectable Black woman delineated by white society and her own community. Yet, her economic marginalization and racial exclusion, living in a storefront because "they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly," render these roles unattainable.²⁸ Also, her style of conforming, like her short-lived obsession with beauty and glamour modeled on Hollywood, was undermined by the realities of her conditions, which alienated

²¹ Cheryl A. Wall, "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: A Study in Narrative Strategy," *African American Review* 47, no. 1 (2014): 11–24.

²² Zanyar Kareem Abdul, *Psychological Study of Themes in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye Through Inferiority Complex* (n.p., 2020); Hassan Khan and Md Shafiqur Rahman, "The Framework of Racism in Toni Morrison's *the Bluest Eye*: A Psychosocial Interpretation," *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 5, no. 2 (2025): 25–28.

²³ Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 92.

²⁴ Blehner, "Using Affect Theory," 4.

²⁵ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 59.

²⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1–2.

²⁷ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 65.

²⁸ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 38.

her from a “hatred for things that mystified or obstructed her.”²⁹ Pauline's encounters generate atmospheric intensities of shame and disgust surrounding her racial and economic status, which circulate impersonally to envelop Pecola in pre-verbal resonances of rejection, rather than as possessed inner feelings.³⁰

Social norms, particularly wherein racialized ideas about ordinariness seep into and contribute to the practice of cruel optimism, construct a sense of Blackness as stranger or as other in one's community and in white society at large. Berlant emphasizes that ordinariness refers to a normative fantasy often linked to “literacy in normativity,” wherein competence in roles equates to belonging “characterized according to normative and regulatory discourses.”³¹ Furthermore, in Morrison's novel, Black characters like Pecola are marked as outsiders not just to white society, but to Black peers who normalize white standards and ideals. For example, when the character Maureen Peal shows up as a light-skinned girl who embodies a sense of beauty epitomized by a “honey voice” and “slippery light,” she is viewed as an ordinary Black character, while Pecola is rendered an unwanted other.³² Ahmed's explanation regarding the stranger as a “cause of unhappiness,” wherein Pecola's Blackness and ugliness are disrupting the community's narrative of striving to fit into some prescriptive white norms, breeds the hate that travels to Pecola who has internalized it as shame.³³ There is a useful affective circle there, especially as Claudia and Frieda at first resented Pecola, but later realized “the Thing to fear was the Thing that made (Maureen) beautiful, and not us,” reflecting that emotional response based in systemic racism.³⁴

Recent scholarship emphasizes how these norms work with economic and cultural constraints to intensify cruel optimism. Yogita Goyal suggests that Morrison exposes the “gendered diaspora” confronting Black women, marked by race and gender that cannot aspire to the promises of domesticity or beauty made available to white women.³⁵ Barbara Christian similarly observes that when the Black community's values align with white values, including for instance beauty, this creates divisions in solidarity and leads characters like Pauline and Cholly to practice affective violence as well as be victims of it.³⁶ The quest for ordinariness, beauty, respectability or economic grounding become cruel, because it requires assimilation into a planetary system deliberately and systematically designed to exclude Black bodies. In Morrison's novel, one example is Pauline's consistent desire for “favorable looks” from other women.³⁷

These norms also produce resistance, but it is a resistance affected by emotional costs. In Claudia's attack on dolls that represented whiteness and socially defined beauty, she expresses an anti-happiness script in which whiteness and acceptability/worth is intertwined with lovableness and happiness. Claudia's anger was described as a reaction to “the absence of shame” associated with normative expectations.³⁸ Her hostility disrupts the affective circle for a moment, but it becomes unstable when her mother scolds her for going against an affective norm. In consideration of negative experiences with cruel optimism, Berlant cautions that abandoning cruel optimism comes with the potential to fear seeing loss of “the good life,” which can lead to peer-pressure, rejection, or hate, all in

²⁹ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 118.

³⁰ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 29–32.

³¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 52.

³² Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 74.

³³ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 121–22.

³⁴ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 74.

³⁵ Yogita Goyal, “The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and *The Bluest Eye*,” *Mfs Modern Fiction Studies* 60, no. 3 (2014): 518–20.

³⁶ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 45–47.

³⁷ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 118.

³⁸ Morrison, 71.

the name of encouraging normativity.³⁹ Claudia's various attempts to exhibit resistance demonstrate both the potential for changes based on resistance, as well as the cost of rejecting an affective norm. Morrison takes the tension of affective resistance seriously by employing a fragmented storytelling style that mirrors the instability of emotional cycles she evokes throughout the book.⁴⁰

Morrison's view of social norms, as normative, and gender norms, as socially defined happiness scripts, portrays their role in constructing a cruel optimism, and happiness writ large, that keeps characters caught in affective circles. The characters are desperately trying to negotiate acceptance and beauty under the weight of systemic racism and sexism and have no chance for flourishing and/or expansion of existence; they will fail and achieve destruction, psychologically and somatically, while simultaneously anticipating an examination of the implications of these normalities on people's life experiences.

Character Analysis Through Affective Lenses

This section investigates the mechanisms by which cruel optimism and affective circles shape the characters' emotional lives and behaviors in *The Bluest Eye*, specifically Pecola Breedlove, Cholly Breedlove, Pauline Breedlove, and Claudia MacTeer. Through detailed readings of central scenes in the novel, the analysis shows how the characters' desires for happiness, acceptance, or beauty, which are all based in a social and gender association with oppression, lead them toward feelings of shame, disgust, and rage, entrenching the characters in cycles of trauma, violence, and obliteration. Morrison's employment of multiple narrators allows for a heightened understanding of these affective dynamics, as it constructs emotions in relation to others and demonstrates how they perpetuate trauma or resistance. Using one of several definitions of affect and drawing on some of the emerging literature on affect, the analysis will show how the experiences of each character evoke broader intersectional oppressions contributing to the overall critique of white supremacy and patriarchal oppression.

In the novel's tragic center, Pecola embodies cruel optimism through her unsettling longing for blue eyes, representative of white beauty that she believes will erase her ugliness and attain her love and acceptance. Berlant defines cruel optimism as an attachment to a fantasy that is injurious to our flourishing, and Pecola's obsession concretizes this condition: "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness ... If her eyes were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different."⁴¹ This hope is cruel because it can never be realized. Pecola cannot escape from her race, and it serves to tighten the noose of her internalization of racialized shame. Sara Ahmed's notion of the "stranger" as an "unhappiness cause" explains how Pecola's Blackness marks her as an outsider, attracting communal rejection that fuels an affective circle of shame and hate.⁴² For example, when Maureen Peal shames Pecola over her father's nudity, Pecola's reaction, a "funny, sad, helpless movement" when she hunches her shoulders, enacts her shame, extending Claudia's anger and the entire community's contempt.⁴³ This interaction aligns with Adlerian descriptions of Pecola as delusional in the inferiority complex, where deficits are made good with unattainable ideals.⁴⁴ These interpretations highlight the intense knot of psychic injury and racialized beauty standards.

Pecola's tragedy shows the systemic devaluation of Black girlhood. Trudier Harris writes that Pecola's desire for blue eyes is not only an individual desire, but something also indicative of a more substantial cultural desire that reflects perceived internalized racism, since white American beauty

³⁹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23–24.

⁴⁰ Wall, "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," 11–12.

⁴¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1; Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 46.

⁴² Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 121–22.

⁴³ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 72.

⁴⁴ Abdul, *Psychological Study*.

ideals destroy Black identity.⁴⁵ When Pecola is incestuously raped by her father Cholly, along with the climax of violence, this completely erases any remaining source of fragile optimism and ultimately results in her being 'identified' with shame, which makes the members of the community willing to deny Pecola's very existence to bolster normative constructions of ideal citizenship: "They ought to take her out of school."⁴⁶ This shut down ultimately completes the affective circle as Pecola's shame becomes a collective apparatus that individuals in the community utilize to stabilize the illusion of a "good Christian colored" life.⁴⁷ Morrison's omniscient narrative voice also underlines this by allowing readers to bear witness to Pecola's unspoken and very real pain, allowing readers to feel Pecola's solitude and to invite a certain level of empathic attunement.⁴⁸ Pecola's longing manifests through atmospheric intensities of disgust around blackness, triggered by sensory scenes like mirror gazing, where pre-verbal affects circulate before linguistic naming as 'ugliness' or moral shame.⁴⁹

Cholly and Pauline, Pecola's parents, demonstrate how cruel optimism can shift victims of systemic oppression into duplicitous agents in their own affective contexts. Cholly's cruelty emerges from his pursuit of freedom and masculinity, compounded by experiences of social and racial rejection that reveal the terrible potential of a crueler form of optimism through violence. Cholly was abandoned at birth and poorly positioned as a human by being humiliated during an intimate encounter with white men. Confronted with comments such as, "Go on and finish. And, nigger, make it good," Cholly's early experiences generate a "violence born of total helplessness."⁵⁰ Berlant reminds us that relinquishing hope can trigger fear about sacrificing the promised good life, and desire can quickly devolve into rage.⁵¹ Evidence of Cholly attempting to reclaim agency through the sexual domination of Pecola suggests he lurches between terrible shame and hate. Maher A. Mahdi argues that Cholly's metamorphosis into a "victim and victimizer" was possible because he could not find a viable place in either Black or white communities so that biological needs overtake humanity.⁵² Cholly's humiliation scene produces impersonal affective intensities of helplessness, resonating bodily before conscious rage or moral evaluation, circulating as atmospheric forces that later manifest in violence.⁵³

Pauline's narrative is similar to Cholly's, yet as a poor Black woman, her pursuit of respectability and beauty in the image of white films collides with reality. Her belief that "they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" internalizes societal rejection, fueling a hatred that shapes her interactions with Pecola.⁵⁴ Her fights with Cholly, where he "poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury," become outlets for their shared despair, creating an affective circle of guilt and anger that engulfs their daughter.⁵⁵ Barbara Christian notes that Pauline's internalization of white values fragments her familial bonds and it turns her into a perpetrator of emotional neglect.⁵⁶ Recent work by Rhaisa Kameela Williams connects Pauline's affective responses to the broader trauma

⁴⁵ Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 69–70.

⁴⁶ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 189.

⁴⁷ Morrison, 56.

⁴⁸ Wall, "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," 11–12.

⁴⁹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1–2.

⁵⁰ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 148.

⁵¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23–24.

⁵² Maher A. Mahdi, "Triangle of Hatred: Sexism, Racism and Alienation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *Canadian Social Science* 11, no. 9 (2015): 46.

⁵³ Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 35; cf. Maher A. Mahdi, "Triangle of Hatred: Sexism, Racism and Alienation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," 45–51.

⁵⁴ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 38.

⁵⁵ Morrison, 42.

⁵⁶ Christian, *Black Women Novelists*, 45–47.

of Black motherhood under systemic racism, where economic and racial barriers thwart normative aspirations, which leads to displaced aggression.⁵⁷

The young narrator Claudia serves as a counterpoint by resisting the happiness scripts that entrap Pecola and her parents, though her rebellion comes with its own affective costs. Claudia's subsequent destruction of white dolls, which she notes "were supposed to bring me great pleasure [but] succeeded in doing quite the opposite," rejects the cruel optimism of the standards of beauty that white children exhibit, and to which black children are expected to subscribe.⁵⁸ Claudia says she could not quite "love" the doll but she "could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable."⁵⁹ Thus, Claudia communicates a sort of pre-conscious affect, in the Massumian, where her rage occurs before any articulated confrontation.⁶⁰ However, this defiance draws the ire of her mother, demonstrating Berlant's point that deserting normative desires brings social alienation.⁶¹ Claudia's changing relationship with Pecola makes this point even more complex: Claudia's "unsullied hatred" transforms into empathic understanding when Claudia recognizes Pecola's humanity, saying, "When we discovered that she clearly did not want to dominate us, we liked her."⁶² Claudia's destruction of white dolls activates pre-personal intensities of aversion, rooted in sensory triggers like the doll's texture and appearance, disrupting atmospheric norms of beauty before verbalized empathy.⁶³

Claudia's affective transformation is especially clear in the menstruation scene, where Pecola's fear "Am I going to die?" contrasts with Claudia's reverence for the "sacred" rite of passage.⁶⁴ This scene illustrates how affects like fear or pride get acted out differently depending on the contextual situation, as Ahmed's affective economies suggest.⁶⁵ While Claudia experiences a shift from hate to love as described by Morrison, an escape from "disinterested violence," Claudia's change does not interrupt the affective circle of communal rejection, although her youth limits her ability to fully resist or counter the systematic behaviors.⁶⁶ Cheryl Wall argues Claudia's narrative voice mixes naivety with adult consciousness, amplifying Morrison's challenge of affective oppression, allowing readers the opportunity to share the ethical conscious awakening.⁶⁷

In Morrison's characters, it can be observed how cruel optimism creates affective circles that facilitate transfers of emotion such as shame, hate, anger, and momentary hope between people and communities. Pecola's internalized shame helps facilitate the community's rejection of her, Cholly and Pauline further compound this rejection through their own trauma, and Claudia's refusal to comply with the community's rejection disrupts the cycle in some small way. The novel's fragmented structure, with shifting narrators, mirrors these cycles, as each perspective reveals a new layer of emotional transfer. In a recent chapter, Tessa Roynon has argued that Morrison's use of narrative fragmentation is not only an aesthetic choice but "intended to resonate with the disordered emotional states of oppression suffered" and produce an overall heightened affective experience for the reader.⁶⁸ By

⁵⁷ Rhaisa Kameela Williams, "Toward a Black Feminist Sense of Something: *The Bluest Eye* and the Work of Black Women's Trauma," in *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 112–15.

⁵⁸ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 20.

⁵⁹ Morrison, 21.

⁶⁰ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 30.

⁶¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23–24.

⁶² Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 19.

⁶³ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 45–47; Wall, "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," 15–17.

⁶⁴ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 28, 32.

⁶⁵ Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 117–39.

⁶⁶ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 23.

⁶⁷ Wall, "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," 11–12.

⁶⁸ Tessa Roynon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 46–50.

tracing these circles, Morrison critiques the destructive power of normative desires while highlighting moments of resistance that challenge, however imperfectly, the status quo.

Broader Implications and Affective Circles in the Novel

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* operates beyond its 1940s historical context to deliver a broad indictment of systemic oppression through the lens of cruel optimism and affective circles, layering multiple narrators and fragmented timelines to articulate the relationality of emotion. Morrison's use of narrative structure, through Claudia's first-person musings, omniscient accounts of Cholly's trauma, and fragmented vignettes like the distorted primer, "Here is the house. It is green and white," reflects the cyclical, contagious qualities of affects such as shame, hate, and despair.⁶⁹ As Cheryl Wall suggests, Morrison's fragmentation imitates the "disordered emotional states" produced within a community fractured by racism, and asks readers to feel the precariousness of her characters' desires.⁷⁰ The silent longing of Pecola for blue eyes, manifested through omniscient narration, works with Claudia's incisive disregard for the meaning of white dolls and those turns of narrative to share layers of emotional transfer. Thus, Lauren Berlant's concept of "ordinary crises" emerges when these disruptions prompt readers to face the violence of normative fantasies, producing an affective relationship with the text.⁷¹ Likewise, Nancy Kang argues that Morrison's rejection of more traditional novelistic conventions emphasizes Black women's lived emotional experiences and invites readers to grapple with the discomfort of complicity in systemic violence.⁷²

This affective critique relates to present-day dynamics concerning race, gender, and trauma, in particular, the fights of Black women against systemic marginalization. In exploring the forms and figures of a Black woman's experience of ugly feelings (affectionate or not), we can draw on Sara Ahmed's notion of affective economies, where feelings of hatred and shame are mobilized through engagement with strangers, what Ahmed refers to as "uneven engagements with strangers."⁷³ For example, Pecola's internalization of ugliness, rooted in her desire for blue eyes, mirrors ongoing issues of colorism, where Eurocentric beauty standards continue to erode Black identity, as Melissa V. Harris-Perry notes in her analysis of shame's role in Black women's lives.⁷⁴ Inter-community violence in the novel, where Pecola's rejection alongside Black community's fragile respectability, continues to provide a framework for understanding modern-day tensions where people have to contend with mass shaming between, and within, intersecting marginalized identities, as Pecola did, and Ngai's thesis of "ugly feelings" should be taken into consideration about these affective circles of feeling in contemporary spaces where scapegoating serves to consolidate normative ideals.⁷⁵ In addition, Rhaisa Kameela Williams connects Pauline's neglect of Pecola with the trauma of Black motherhood in the context of the economic and racial pressures, which remains relevant to disinvestment still having a "negative influence on the stability of families."⁷⁶ This relationship between desire and outcome in the novel stays readily relevant. Pecola's desire for blue eyes creates harm and leads to rape and madness, continuing the cycle of shame, hate, and alienation. Cholly's need to find freedom and masculinity turns into violence, transferring his rage onto Pecola. Pauline's aspiration for respectability and beauty ultimately results in neglect and violence in the family, circulating her own anger and guilt through her family. Claudia, confronting this habitual cycle of isolation, responds to white norms in contradictory

⁶⁹ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 1.

⁷⁰ Wall, "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," 11–12.

⁷¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 10.

⁷² Kang, "Morrison's Aesthetic of Fragmentation: Reimagining Black Female Subjectivity in *The Bluest Eye*," 33–35.

⁷³ Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 117–39.

⁷⁴ Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 104–30.

⁷⁵ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 6–10.

⁷⁶ Williams, "Toward a Black Feminist Sense of Something," 112–15.

ways; her feelings for Pecola and resistance to dolls can leave her alienated; nevertheless, her resistance to conformity carries the duality of resistance and costs.⁷⁷ More recently, Nardi showed that Pecola's natural connections, even for brief moments, hold affective significance, which could point to alternate attachments beyond the destructive happiness scripts.⁷⁸

Morrison's stated purpose of creating "deep feeling" situates the novel as a space for active engagement, emphasizing ethical responsibility for readers.⁷⁹ Claudia's movement from resentment to empathy for Pecola provides a model for this kind of engagement as it invites readers to work through their judgments toward understanding, which connects with Elspeth Probyn's discussion of the transformative powers of shame.⁸⁰ As such, the novel challenges readers to confront their own complicity in, and the consequences of, emotional and affective circles of harm, plausibly connecting Morrison's story with Carolyn C. Denard's reading of Morrison's work as reparative and facilitating an account of the legacies of racism on emotion.⁸¹ This invitation extends to literary studies, where, as Barbara Christian argues, Morrison pushes scholars to read "with the heart" by engaging imaginatively with the lived experiences of Black women, and accordingly, to challenge what is rendered knowable based on prevailing Eurocentric narratives.⁸² *The Bluest Eye* illustrates affective circles, and also the anti-social powers of normative desires, as well as spaces of resistance, such as Claudia's rebellion, that indicate points of disruption of representational affective circles, both within the text, and within multiple contemporary contexts. Ultimately, the novel stimulates a reconsideration of the ways in which literature is regarded as the facilitator of empathic connections; and interrogating fantasies that stabilize oppressive conditions, and posing a question, for both readers and scholars, as to what it can mean to read in this radical and interrogative way.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* reveals the destructive power of social racism and sexism through an affective theory lens to examine how the characters' striving of normative ideals like beauty, belonging, respectability locked them into overpowering cruel optimisms and affective circles that continued harm and exclusion. Through the analysis of Pecola's tragic desire for blue eyes, Cholly and Pauline's genesis from joint victims to victimizers, and Claudia's resistant sense of empathy, this study displayed how emotions (shame, hate, and hope) circulate within and in between bodies.⁸³ Morrison's text is fragmented also, with multiple voices and disrupted time, which is itself a contribution to the complexities of the affective dynamics. Morrison's text trades on readers' feelings of dissonance between normative white fantasies and Black lived realities.⁸⁴ Accordingly, the novel surfaces as a serious challenge to the good life that happiness scripts promise, exploring the scripts of happiness that perpetuate intersectional harm through impersonal affective circles rather than psychologized inner emotions.⁸⁵

This affective reading applies not only to *The Bluest Eye* but can be extended into the larger context of Morrison's oeuvre, where affective cycles also criticize systemic oppression. For example, in *Beloved*, the complexities of Sethe's maternal love are articulated in the shadows of slavery, create affections that include circles of guilt and grief, akin to Pecola's isolation based on the unwanted

⁷⁷ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 19, 38, 148, 189.

⁷⁸ Paola A. Nardi, "Pecola and the Natural World in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *Iperstoria* 23 (2024).

⁷⁹ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 92.

⁸⁰ Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 15–20.

⁸¹ Carolyn C. Denard, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ed. Justine Tally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–13.

⁸² Christian, *Black Women Novelists*, 45–47.

⁸³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1; Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 59.

⁸⁴ Wall, "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," 11–12.

⁸⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 192–93; Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 120–25.

acknowledgment of shame.⁸⁶ Morrison's Sula, similarly, explores communal rejection of nonconformist women, where affects like envy and fear shape social exclusion, suggesting a continuity in Morrison's exploration of emotional violence.⁸⁷ These connections invite further research into how Morrison's works use affect to challenge dominant cultural narratives, particularly in the context of Black women's resistance to normative constraints.

By asking readers for profound feelings, Morrison establishes *The Bluest Eye* as a participatory space of ethical empathy; it urges readers to interrogate their complicity in the affective circles that marginalize the "other."⁸⁸ The relevance of the novel remains intact even today with theme possibilities found in colorism and inter-community matters; Morrison enriched readers with a multitude of contemporary resonances that link the themes of the novel into the contemporary moment, pressing scholars to think affectively and in terms of lived experience.⁸⁹ By introducing the concept of affective circles, this study provides a new analytical tool for mapping the cyclical and contagious nature of emotions in literary texts, offering a replicable framework for future analyses of intersectional oppression.



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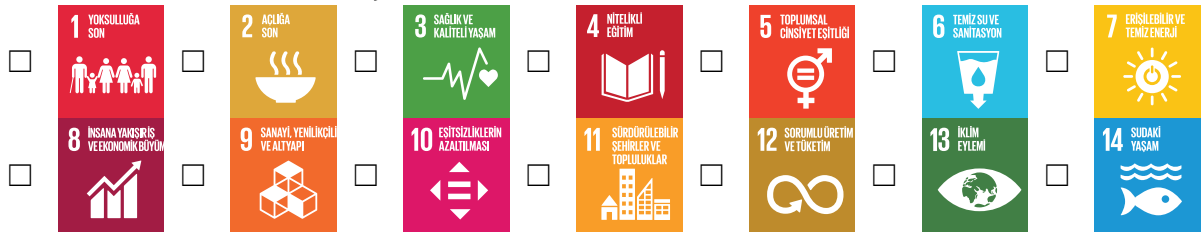
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⁸⁶ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 89–90.

⁸⁷ Christian, *Black Women Novelists*, 45–47.

⁸⁸ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 92; Probyn, *Blush*, 15–20.

⁸⁹ Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 104–30.



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Affective Circles and Cruel Optimism: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as A Critique of Intersectional Oppression

Extended Abstract

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) offers a profound exploration of the intersections of race, gender, and class through the lens of affect theory, particularly Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and Sara Ahmed's theories of happiness scripts and affective economies. This study argues that Morrison's characters, ensnared in "affective circles"—cyclical, contagious emotional dynamics such as shame, hate, and futile hope—pursue desires for beauty, belonging, and respectability that ultimately obstruct their flourishing, perpetuating trauma and social exclusion. By applying affect theory to the novel's fragmented narrative and key scenes of violence, alienation, and resistance, this analysis reveals how Morrison critiques systemic oppression and invites readers to engage ethically with the emotional toll of white supremacy and patriarchal norms. The novel's relevance to contemporary Black women's struggles underscores its role as a transformative tool for fostering imaginative empathy and challenging destructive societal fantasies.

The study introduces the concept of "affective circles" to describe how emotions circulate within and between bodies, reinforcing systemic oppression. Drawing on Berlant's cruel optimism, defined as an attachment to objects or fantasies (e.g., beauty or social acceptance) that harm rather than help, the analysis examines how characters like Pecola Breedlove, Cholly, Pauline, and Claudia MacTeer navigate normative ideals that promise happiness but deliver alienation. Pecola's longing for blue eyes epitomizes this cruel optimism, reflecting internalized racism as she seeks an unattainable white beauty standard to escape her perceived ugliness. Sara Ahmed's notion of happiness scripts—socially prescribed paths to joy through conformity—further illuminates how gender and racial norms create exclusionary dynamics. For instance, Pauline's pursuit of respectability through Hollywood-inspired glamour fails due to her racial and economic marginalization, transferring shame to Pecola and perpetuating affective violence.

Morrison's narrative structure, employing multiple narrators and

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fragmented timelines, amplifies these emotional dynamics. The distorted primer—“Here is the house. It is green and white”—contrasts idealized white domesticity with the harsh realities of Black life in 1940s Lorain, Ohio, highlighting the dissonance between normative fantasies and lived experiences. Claudia’s first-person reflections, combined with omniscient accounts of Cholly’s trauma, create a participatory emotional space, aligning with Morrison’s intent to elicit “deep feelings” from readers. This fragmented style mirrors the cyclical nature of affective circles, where emotions like shame and hate transfer between characters and communities, reinforcing systemic harm. For example, Pecola’s rejection by her peers and family, intensified by Maureen Peal’s light-skinned privilege, illustrates how racialized beauty standards generate contagious affects that alienate her further.

The analysis delves into character-specific manifestations of cruel optimism. Pecola’s tragic desire for blue eyes reflects a cultural devaluation of Black girlhood, as noted by Trudier Harris, where internalized racism destroys identity. Her rape by Cholly and subsequent communal rejection complete an affective circle, transforming her shame into a collective mechanism for upholding normative ideals. Cholly and Pauline, victims of racial and economic exclusion, become victimizers, channeling their despair into violence and neglect. Cholly’s pursuit of masculinity through domination and Pauline’s internalization of white beauty standards create cycles of anger and guilt that engulf Pecola. In contrast, Claudia’s resistance—seen in her destruction of white dolls—disrupts these cycles, though her defiance incurs social costs, as Berlant notes, due to the fear of abandoning the “good life.” Her evolving empathy for Pecola, particularly in the menstruation scene, models an ethical engagement that challenges readers to confront their complicity in systemic violence.

Recent scholarship enriches this affective reading. Melissa V. Harris-Perry connects shame in Black women’s lives to colonial legacies, while Rhaisa Kameela Williams links Pauline’s neglect to the trauma of Black motherhood under systemic racism. Cheryl Wall and Tessa Roynon emphasize Morrison’s fragmented style as a reflection of disordered emotional states, enhancing the novel’s affective critique. The study also draws on Brian Massumi’s concept of affect as “pre-personal intensity” and Sven Blehner’s view of affects as “sticky” and socially determined, extending these ideas to Morrison’s work to highlight how emotions precede conscious action and shape behavior.

The broader implications of this analysis position *The Bluest Eye* as a vital intervention in discourses on race, gender, and trauma. Its themes resonate with contemporary issues like colorism and inter-community tensions, as seen in Pecola’s marginalization and Pauline’s economic struggles. By introducing “affective circles” as an analytical framework, this study offers a replicable tool for mapping emotional dynamics in literature, particularly in texts addressing intersectional oppression. Morrison’s rejection of traditional novelistic conventions, as Nancy Kang notes, prioritizes Black women’s emotional experiences, urging readers to grapple with discomfort and complicity. The novel’s call for ethical empathy, as articulated by Barbara Christian and Carolyn C. Denard, challenges scholars to read “with the heart,” reimagining how literature can disrupt oppressive narratives.

Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* critiques the destructive power of normative desires while highlighting moments of resistance, such as Claudia’s rebellion, that suggest possibilities for breaking affective circles. By fostering empathic connections, the novel interrogates fantasies that sustain oppression and invites readers to reconsider their role in perpetuating or dismantling these cycles. This study extends its affective framework to Morrison’s broader oeuvre, noting parallels in *Beloved* and *Sula*, where emotions like guilt and envy similarly critique systemic harm. Future research could further explore how Morrison’s works use affect to challenge dominant cultural narratives, particularly in the context of Black women’s resilience.

Keywords: affective circles, cruel optimism, racialized beauty, internalized racism, ethical empathy..



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