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# Resistance of Female Stereotypes in *The Bluest Eye*

– Destroying Images of Black Womanhood and  
Motherhood

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**Abstract**

Stereotypes and myths are created by media to simplify and mystify reality. The two are used to form negative stereotypical images that are used as tools of social oppression in today's white patriarchy. This essay will focus on how Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* depicts black womanhood and motherhood and resists the reductive images of black women through the narrative technique. In the text we find the stereotypical images of the Mammy and the Matriarch in the character Pauline "Polly" Breedlove, both simplifying and mystifying black motherhood but also condescending towards African-American family constellations. The text resists these images by making readers inhabit Polly who at first fits in to the two archetypes, only to then give us additional information and use an engaging narrative technique that invites the reader to decide if Polly really is the Mammy and the Matriarch.

Keywords: African-American criticism, resistance, stereotypes, archetypes, images, womanhood, motherhood, Mammy, Matriarch, Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

## Toni Morrison's resistance of the controlling images of Black mothers in *The Bluest Eye*

### Introduction

Called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer, The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself (qtd. in Hill Collins 4).

The African American woman is often portrayed in literature and art through stereotypes. Using reductive stereotypes makes her easier than other racial sub-groups to explain and “understand” because, as Trudier Harris shows us, it is not her that is being explained; it is society’s stereotypical perception of her. Julia Jordan-Zachery writes that the purpose of stereotypes is not to reflect a reality but to “function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations” which “normalizes the inequitable position of black woman” (26).

In order to understand stereotypes one must first understand the construction and purpose of myths. Richard Slotkin defines myths as stories from before who are removed from their context and through history have acquired symbolical connotations to the community that produce them. He gives us the example of the game Cowboys and Indians which is a myth that has been taken out of its context, which is the systematical genocide of Native Americans, and that has been given new positive connotations for Americans to make the game “morally acceptable” (71) but still “carries with it a heavy and persistent (white) ideological charge” (72). Myths are used to mystify reality and to allow the creation of a new truth that both socially and financially benefits the creators of myths. Myths and stereotypes work hand in hand, the former mystifying reality whilst the latter simplifies it. Jordan-Zachery writes that in the context of images of black women, myths are used to justify fear “while at the same time promoting supremacist beliefs,” which results in governmental policies that aids the goals of the supremacists (30).

These biases are political power tools in the hands of white male elite, which are being used to retain power and authority. By exploiting them and spreading them through literature, film, social media etc., elite groups succeed in making these fabricated stereotypes seem “natural.” Being that we live in a patriarchal society, these elite groups are usually men from the racial group in majority, who are also a financial authority. Because these men are from the bourgeoisie, to put it in Marxist terms, they are the ones that also financially benefit from the spread of these stereotypes.

Bell hooks explains that these myths originate from slavery. She says that whites “justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women” by accusing them of being the initiators of sex, thus stereotyping them as sexual savages, and “an animal cannot be raped.” (52) Black women suppressed their sexuality and focused on being good mothers, and because good motherhood is a virtue only appropriate for Euro-American women, they were instead labeled the negative maternal stereotypes “Aunt Jemimas, Sapphires, Amazons” (70). This essay investigates the resistance of maternal stereotypes in Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*. Primarily this essay will focus on the African-American mother Pauline Breedlove who has a limp that makes her feel isolated from the rest of society. She is obsessed with black-and-white movies and they have taught her all she needs to know about (her lack of) physical beauty and love. Pauline Breedlove escapes her family and their terrible lifeless storefront home in Lorain, Ohio, by going to work as a maid in a white household. She and her daughter Pecola Breedlove both have low self-esteem and lack self-love, and therefore they search for approval and acceptance in both the black and white community. We learn the history of the Breedlove family which ends in calamity as Pecola’s unhealthy obsession with having blue eyes in addition to being raped by her own father Cholly Breedlove, drive her to madness. The MacTeer daughters Claudia and Frieda, who are Pecola’s only friends, find out about Pecola pregnancy, they plant marigold seeds hoping the growth of the flowers will make Pecola’s baby survive. Unfortunately the flowers never grow and Pecola’s baby dies.

The African American author Toni Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Being specialized in African American literature, all of her novels depict the struggles of living as a black American in a white, patriarchal society. Morrison is known for the epic themes and deep symbolisms in her works, which she uses to resist the stereotypes of black Americans.

This essay shows how *The Bluest Eye* resists the stereotypes applied to black mothers. It succeeds in this by first making the readers inhabit the different stereotypes, and thus slowly breaking them down from within. The text does this by giving the readers information that makes them question the simplicity and one-dimensionality of these stereotypes, but also a narrative technique that disrupts the story through the characters’ bizarre actions and through an engaging narrative that forces the reader to form an opinion of the character. This opinion can be whether or not we can sympathize with the character, whether or not the character fits in to an archetypal image, or whether or not the character’s actions are right or wrong. Therefore the main thesis of this essay is that *The Bluest Eye* resists the stereotypes applied to African American mothers by my making the readers inhabit the character Polly through a disruptive narrative technique and through information about the characters socio-economic situation that invites the reader to question the validity of the stereotypes. The narrative technique draws

the readers in to the minds of the characters by giving historical information of the characters but also through abruptly changing the narrative tone or making the tone disturbingly calm and distanced in contrast to the bizarre situations that are being explained, which gives the reader a chance to step away from the story and form their own opinion of how well the characters fit in to the stereotypical images.

The black woman is the binary opposite to what is considered to be the “good woman”, which is usually Euro-American. The stereotypical images of the black woman are the opposite of “good womanhood”. Jordan-Zachary explains that the image of “good” womanhood is connected to the image of the good wife and the good mother, who stays at the “woman’s natural sphere of activity” which is her home (27). Therefore the black woman can never attain respectability as she is often financially unable to be a stay-at-home mother, and her ability to nurture her children and her husband has been mystified as “bad” motherhood and wifedom, which makes it impossible for her to embody the definition of good womanhood that Jordan-Zachary describes above.

This essay will analyze the depiction of black motherhood in *The Bluest Eye* through Pauline “Polly” Breedlove and other black mothers in the text. More specifically, this work will study how the text initially presents black mothers in negative archetypal images only to resist these reductive images by giving contextual information and using a narrative technique that engages the readers to question the authenticity of these stereotypes. This analysis will be completed with analyses of other black mothers in the book.

### **Previous criticism**

Significantly, research has neglected the motherhood theme in *The Bluest Eye* and there has not been much written about the stereotypical, patriarchal roles that are played by the mothers in the book. Also, there are not many works about the resistance of the stereotypes in the book in general. The novel has been analyzed by scholars and students through predominantly two viewpoints: a psychoanalytical and a literary standpoint. One psychoanalytical reading is “Probing Racial Dilemmas in *The Bluest Eye* with the Spyglass of Psychology” by Marek Palasinski and Anna Zebialowicz which discusses the psychological reasons behind Pecola’s wish for blue eyes, but also why Pecola offers so little resistance to internalizing white standards for beauty and worth. The work argues that Pecola blames herself for being black and ugly and that she is pessimistic regarding a change of society’s perception of blackness for the better. This mindset is very noticeable in Pauline Breedlove as well, and is the reason why she acts in a manner that very much resembles the Matriarch and the Mammy.

Other readings focus on the violence in *The Bluest Eye*. One such analysis is by Amanda Putnam who focuses on the theme of violence in four Morrison novels, including *The Bluest Eye*. She argues that both Claudia and Pecola practice violence, one outwardly and one inwardly, which is a consequence of the invisibility that they feel and experience. Putnam claims that society's beauty ideal is forced upon the girls, which makes Pecola believe in her own "deficiencies" and makes Claudia "attack the source of oppression". I argue that this violence is very well portrayed in the character Pauline Breedlove, as she is equally affected by the beauty ideals and therefore lashes out on her family. Also, Polly's physical violence goes hand in hand with the violent and destructive image she has of her own blackness.

Critics have also discussed the matter of deformity in Morrison's novels, including *The Bluest Eye*. Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak writes in her work that both Pecola and Pauline have deformities that enable their surroundings to judge them based on these defects. Pecola suffers from her unique blackness, and Pauline is a victim of her limp. Mermann-Jozwiak argues that the black women's bodies are "ideological sites" (189) on which both gender and race biases created by in a white patriarchal society, are depicted. It is the constant oppression that forces the characters to become violent. Polly's body is an ideological site in the way that she is taught to hate herself because of the gender and race biases that she is a victim of, and love the white ideal that is physically impossible for her to attain. This is relatable to this essay, as it studies how the self-hate that Polly experiences is what makes her resemble the Matriarch and the Mammy. This affects her mentally because she is destined to fail no matter how hard she tries to imitate the white woman, and therefore she ultimately becomes this ticking bomb, only feeling alive when she is violent and becomes the stereotypical image of the Angry Black Woman. Polly is a ghost inhabiting two contrasting world, the white world that she does not fit into and the black world that she does not want to fit into. When she becomes violent she becomes the black woman that she wants to run away from, which makes her further away from attaining respectability and acceptance in the white community, and subsequently even more depressed.

Morrison turns our attention to these injustices by inviting her readers to question both the white patriarchal society, but also the storyline and the characters themselves. She does this using a narrative technique that invites the reader to form a certain opinion of what is right and wrong, and what is understandable and excusable, and then abruptly "waking up" the reader and making him question his previously formed opinion. This "waking up" is accomplished through disturbing and bizarre scenes in the text which is told with a dis-attached, almost formal voice. Lara Fulton adds to this and argues that Morrison engages her readers to participate in an interactive session where she uses a fragmented story telling technique that forces us to question "concepts of whiteness and blackness and outline the

detrimental effects of white cultural domination upon black and white identity and culture” (i). The fragmented story telling technique is a powerful tool that also disrupts the reader’s view of good and bad as binary oppositions. An example of this is the character Cholly who is first presented through a third person perspective as an unsympathetic bad father, but when the readers are given the evolution of Cholly as a black man and father in a white society they are able to pity him and sympathize with him, regardless of his behavior.

Jane Kuenz continues on the same idea and discusses the concepts of whiteness as an ideal, in the context of the white patriarchal commodity culture. She explains that the names of the three prostitutes (Poland, China and the Maginot Line) symbolize the fascist invasion performed by white hegemonic culture on African-American women (421).

As mentioned before, there has been a seemingly void of analyses centering on the motherhood theme in *The Bluest Eye*. Critics have instead turned to Morrison’s *Beloved* to immerse themselves in how Morrison depicts African American motherhood. Terry Paul Ceaser argues that the motherhood theme and the slavery theme in *Beloved* are related, and that both power structures are turned around in the novel. The mother in *Beloved*, Sethe, is a slave to her own daughter, Beloved, and kills her in order to “protect her own self-possession” (113). Sethe is enslaved to the emotional and financial responsibilities of being a care-taker, so by killing her daughter she is freeing herself from the shackles of motherhood. But because mother and daughter are “two parts of the same being,” “slavery survives, and reinstitutes itself properly” because the mere existence of Beloved forces Sethe in to a lifelong feeling of guilt (119).

Jean Wyatt has also discussed the motherhood theme in *Beloved* and she also states that Sethe is a slave to Beloved because her pregnancy makes her “lack a subjective center” (476). She agrees with Paul Ceaser on that the killing of Beloved is a way for Sethe to practice her rights over her own body (476), but for a different reason than to free herself from motherhood. Wyatt explains that Sethe kills Beloved in fear of returning to slavery and that Morrison actually celebrates motherhood by ascribing maternal heroism to it by making Sethe courageous enough to escape to free her children. She also writes that Morrison celebrates childbirth by thoroughly describing it and by writing that Sethe and Amy did something good by having their children. I would like to discuss the motherhood theme similarly to Wyatt, but in *The Bluest Eye*.

This essay will primarily focus on the character Pauline Breedlove, a character which to begin with is constructed as a stereotypical black mother. As mentioned previously, the text resists this image by allowing the readers to inhabit the character through the narrative technique that creates an

engaging environment for the reader, but also through the information about the characters and the society that they live in, only to slowly destroy and dissolve the stereotypes. The reader is never told what is right and what is wrong, but he is engaged by the narrative to understanding that by himself. This work will study Polly because she is an ambiguous character who is full of opposites. She is strong, but also very weak, she accepts reality but she also remains hopeful at the unattainable. She is an extreme character, and very much an extreme mother. The extremeness makes Polly fit the stereotypical images of black women and mothers so well, which is what makes her such an interesting character to study. Why do we find her so extreme and almost grotesque? And how does the text complicate this extremeness in order to resist it?

Because of the lack of literary analyses on the motherhood theme in *The Bluest Eye*, this study will be discussing the stereotypical roles of black motherhood that have been applied to the female characters in the book. It attempts to show how Putnam's idea on female violence is integral to Pauline's character who both internalizes and acts out self-hatred, but also to do an analysis on her lack of resistance to white patriarchal values. This work will analyze Pauline Breedlove along this line, but focusing on the motherhood theme in *The Bluest Eye* similarly to what Paul Ceaser and Wyatt have done with *Beloved*.

### **Theoretical framework**

*Ain't I a Woman* by Bell hooks examines the impact of sexism combined with racism on African American women. hooks writes that black women have excluded themselves from the feminist movement because they have been faced with the "harsher" tool of oppression that is racism, and that they are scared to admit the equally oppressive "harshness" of sexism (3). African-Americans only sought equal citizenship rights and they accepted their cultural subordination, and black women especially were taught that their liberation lied in their ability to adjust to their subordination as women and as black. hooks explains how modern-day oppression of black women traces back to the slave era where female slaves were less valued than male slaves, although they often performed both "male" and "female" labor. The rape of African American slaves was labeled as prostitution by abolitionists and was blamed on the black woman's savage sexual appetite. In an attempt to "shift the focus of attention away from sexuality", black women emphasized "their commitment to motherhood" and providing for their family (70). In order to de-value these seemingly good attributes, white male bourgeoisie created the negative stereotypes of, for instance, the Mammy, Matriarch, and Jezebel. hooks explains that all these myths are "anti-woman" as they discredit en de-value what is considered to be women's work while at the same forcing the women to stay within the boundaries of the female sphere, literally and

figuratively. The biases are also anti-black, which makes the black woman a victim of both racist and sexist oppression from white men and women, and black men (70).

Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* also takes a theoretical approach to explaining the black woman's role and status in the context of a white patriarchal system. In hooks work I focused on the historical aspects that have led to the controlling mythical images applied to African American women, but in Hill Collins' book I delved into the construction of, and the different aspects of, the actual stereotypes. Hill Collins says that the purpose of her work is to both empower black women by educating them on the root of, and the practice of, systematic oppression of them as both black and women. The definition of a family, created by a "white elite," is problematic for African Americans, not only does it require a heterosexual relationship; it also requires a patriarch and a subordinate stay-at-home mother, and a division between the public and the private sphere. The difficulties stem from the slave era, when African American were denied the right to, or the possibility of, a division between the two spheres. During slavery black men and women were forced to live at their workplace, which put them under constant supervision of their masters. Similar to what hooks touched upon, female slaves were denied the right to foster their and their slave-master's children, which changed the definition of motherhood for them. The longer black women could continue bearing children for their slave-owners and other slaves, the longer they got to stay at that estate with their friends among the slaves. After the emancipation, black women continued working, because their husbands were denied a family wage. Therefore even after slavery, African-Americans could still not conform to the white patriarchal definition of a family. In today's society where many African American families have two incomes, it is through controlling myths and stereotypes such as the Mammy and the Matriarch, that black women are still excluded from the white definitions of "woman" and "mother." Hill Collins describes black women as "the Other"; as an image of not belonging created to "emphasize the significance of belonging" (70). One might argue that women like Oprah and the First Lady shows us the ability to belong in white society, but these women are exceptions to the general rule.

Similar to what hooks says about black motherhood, Hill Collins writes that the controlling image of "the superstrong Black mother" is praised by African American male thinkers, an image that controls black women in the sense that it requires the continuance of them putting their needs secondary to everyone else, in order "to remain on this pedestal" (174). Hooks explained that black motherhood was given derogatory stereotypes by whites, but according to Hill Collins the praise of black motherhood is also detrimental to black women's freedom. I do not agree with this, as the praise of black mothers will lead to an appreciation for their work and a higher social status, something that will

give them the respectability that they lack today. Also the praise of the black mother in her motherhood role will lead to a larger appreciation of the unpaid domestic work that she does, which will lead to the African American men committing to the paid work in the public sphere to financially provide for their family. The lack of appreciation of the unpaid domestic work is what makes the woman in the heterosexual couple do all the household work by herself, and then share the financial responsibilities with her significant other by also working outside her home.

Hill Collins continues by explaining the different trials that one runs into when mothering daughters. She writes: “Understanding this goal of balancing the need for the physical survival of their daughters with the vision of encouraging them to transcend the boundaries of the sexual politics of Black womanhood explains many apparent contradictions in Black mother-daughter relationships” (185). One of these contradictions is the overly protective and stern black mother who fosters independent young women.

Julia Jordan-Zachery’s *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy*, similarly to Hill Collins’ work, focuses on explaining the actual stereotypes and not on their origin. Also, Jordan-Zachery examines how these images influence policy making in the United States. Therefore this work concentrates on a shorter time period than the other works. She continues and states that black women are judged on how well they resemble “good womanhood” and motherhood, which is impossible for them because of social and racial factors (33). These are the factors that Hill Collins claims hinders African-American families from fitting in to the definition of “a good family”. The Mammy and Matriarch were sexist images of black women and women in general, created to exclude black women from society by making them seem like binary oppositions to white women, but they were also created to scare white women away from adopting the negative characteristics that we find in these stereotypes. For example, the Mammy is kind, loving and protective of her white family. These are characteristics that all women, including white women, should imitate. But the Matriarch on the other hand is violent and outspoken which is considered to be typically male. By designing this image in this way all black women are excluded from what is considered normal and appropriate, and all white women are taught to be quiet and “pleasant”. These images are thus oppressive of black women, but also white women, as they are both sexist and racist. The stereotypes were also created as a means of exploitation. Jordan-Zachery claims that the Mammy icon was formed to be non-threatening, to make whites feel comfortable enough to have her in their home, but also aggressive enough to make whites believe that she could keep the other slaves in place and protect them “from other blacks” (37). The author describes the Matriarch as “the black motherhood in the black household” and she is created to be blamed for many of the problems within the black community (42).

### **The Controlling Image of the Mammy**

The Mammy is an African American female domestic worker who works for a white family. She cares for the children in a motherly fashion and she also takes care of the house, not only because she is obligated to but also because she wants to keep it in its best state. The Mammy loves the family that she works for and therefore she is not burdened by fostering and nurturing them. hooks states that the Mammy was designed to be so nurturing and loving because “it epitomized the ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal black womanhood – complete submission to the will of whites” (84). This makes the Mammy a prototype of society’s opinion on what role that black women should play. “True” womanhood is partially being a mother, and during slavery black women were not seen as mothers but as sources of commodity which gave them a lesser societal value as mothers. Hill Collins declares that the controlling image of the Mammy was created to justify exploitation of house slaves, and that it is a “normative yardstick” that all black women are evaluated against. The Mammy represents the dominant group’s ideal relationship between black females and the white elite but it also portrays the desire that black women have to be a part of white society. This desire is so great that she is happily submissive to her white masters. The black woman is not considered to be neither a “true” mother nor a “true” lady by the white society because although she is well-mannered, being a “lady” has more to do with race than good behavior.

The Mammy is also a submissive character that has accepted her subordination to her white master. She accepts her status as a sexless black servant and is grateful for her role in “her” white family. Ultimately, the Mammy is considered to be happy. Because she is so loving and nurturing, the Mammy is described in media as equally loved in return. This is fabricated to conceal the reality of the economic exploitation of house slaves and (later on) maids.

The character Polly might seem like a typical Mammy at first glance. The narrator describes the house that she works in as a beautiful white mansion with a great many flowers in a wheelbarrow. The narrator says: “Short crocus blades sheathed the purple-and-white hearts that so wished to be first they endured the chill and rain of early spring” (106). These living, blooming spring flowers symbolize life and rebirth, the total opposite of the lifeless home that Mrs. Breedlove lives in. The house is described as “proud” and glorious. Mrs. Breedlove sees the beautiful home as her own and she takes pride in its majestic beauty.

When the MacTeer girls see Mrs. Breedlove at work in her white uniform, they describe her as beautiful and glowing. The girls smell of the delightful odors of a feast coming from the clean, white house. The white uniform that Mrs. Breedlove is wearing is literal, but it also symbolizes the whiteness that Polly embodies at her workplace. She is no longer a poor Black woman, she is instead a part of a White family, and she lives like them and eats like them. This is reminiscent of Fanon's words: "Whether he likes it or not, the black man has to wear the livery the white man has fabricated for him. Look at children's comic books: all the Blacks are mouthing the ritual 'Yes, boss' " (17).

When Pecola Breedlove accidentally drops a blueberry pie on the floor in the beautiful house, her mother panics and hysterically repeats "My floor, my floor" (109). She panics not only because of the mess that her daughter has created, but also because her two worlds have now collided and she struggles to keep them apart. Because of this collision, the young white girl has now seen a part of Mrs. Breedlove that she earlier kept concealed. Mrs. Breedlove's aggressive reaction to the mess is because she now fears to lose her escape haven in her work place, as it has now been tainted by her uncomfortable reality.

This is one passage where the text invites the reader to inhabit the text, a technique that is used for resistance of the reductive image of the Mammy. We as readers are eased in to this passage through information of how beautiful and kind Mrs. Breedlove looks. The girls have a friendly conversation with her and she invites them in to the beautiful house with the delicious odors. The friendly tone abruptly changes when Pecola drops the pie and her mother starts beating her. The beating is very surprising and Polly becomes almost manic and struggles to finish her sentences. The beating is one surprising element that makes the reader stop and think about whether or not the mother, who here embodies the Matriarch, did the right, or even understandable, thing. It becomes difficult to just read through that segment without contemplating which of the two characters you should sympathize with. Pecola dropped the pie by accident, but she also ruined the hard work of her mother. The hard work of baking the pie and cleaning the white house, and the even harder work of attaining respectability in the house. To be able to form an opinion of who is right and who is wrong. The reader is surprised again when Polly turns away from beating her daughter, only to turn to soothing the white girl. The narrator says: "Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple" (109). The text resists the image of the Mammy by showing us that she is not as essentially happy and kind as she is portrayed. She is human and has all of these "negative" emotions, which she suppresses in order to create this joyous façade that she lives in when she is at her job. The text also resists the images of both the Mammy and the Matriarch by forcing us to step in to the characters and understand the logic behind their actions,

which complicates the characters and individualizes their actions, automatically resisting the stereotypes.

Not only is the house that Mrs. Breedlove works in beautiful, the people that live in it are beautiful as well. The daughter of Mrs. Breedlove's employers is a young blonde girl who wears beautiful pink dresses and pink bedroom slippers. She looks very much like the ideal beauty that can be found on candy wrappers and on coffee mugs, and she exudes innocence. The girl calls Mrs. Breedlove "Polly" and Mrs. Breedlove speaks to the girl with kind words such as "baby," as she hushes and soothes her.

The narrator resists the stereotype of the Mammy by describing the contrast between Pauline's family and the family that she works for. The text describes the Breedlove family as poor and black, but mostly "relentlessly and aggressively ugly" (38). The narrator calls the ugliness "unique" (38). Pauline's ugliness is "unique" because she lets it consume her life and guide her choices, and no one can change her mind about it. As the text implies, it is this ugliness within that keeps the family in their terrible home in Lorain, Ohio, and not their financial state or their skin tone. The text describes the ugliness as "relentless" and "aggressive," which enables us to understand the almost physical power of this ugliness. It is more than skin deep; it is a force that is stronger than the character's sense of logic and reality.

The emphasis on the uniqueness of this ugliness can be seen as resistance to the stereotype of Polly as a representative of all black women. By describing Polly's ugliness as unique, it shows the reader that black women are not all the same. Not all Black women feel this ugly, and the ones that actually do feel ugly do not all feel this passive under the relentless and aggressive force of their ugliness. Also, Polly's internal ugliness and hurt is described in resistance to the cheerful Mammy stereotype. Polly is not content with her life; she is so weak and desperate to escape her situation that she retreats into the home of her white employers. Working for them is a better alternative than taking care of her own ugly family, and therefore the happiness that she expresses when she is at her job is not a reflection of how well her employers treat her; it is rather a reflection of her desperation bordering on lunacy. The text is criticizing our society's constant need of imitating others, especially people of famous people of status such as actors, singers and athletes. That need originates in the discomfort and dissatisfaction that people feel in their own lives, which in itself is a direct result of the glamorous "Hollywood-life" that we are taught to idolize.

The narrator also informs us that the white family gave Pauline her first nickname – Polly. Kuenz says about the nickname: "Finally it is easier for Pauline to ignore that both the name and the

anecdotes are condescending and exemplary of her subordinate, and ultimate outsider, status in the Fisher household” (425). I do not agree with this statement, as “Polly” is more of a term of endearment.

The text also resists the stereotype of the Mammy by explaining how horrific Polly’s own home really is. The text describes Polly’s home as dead and loveless, and therefore Polly’s workplace becomes an escape from the terrible reality. Polly’s love for the white household and hate for her own dark house could be seen as a symbol for self-hatred towards her blackness. This clashes with, and resists, the filmic depictions of the Mammy while at the same time criticizing our culture’s perception of happiness as a result of acquisition of material things.

The house the Breedloves live in is an abandoned storefront. It is described as a house that stands out in its ugliness, as it does not blend in with its surroundings. The most interesting thing that can be noted about the house is the furniture and even it “had aged without ever having become familiar” (35). The house is also described with a stench, a symbol for the inability for most people to live in the house. “And the joylessness stank, pervading everything,” the narrator says, explaining how it is the lack of joy, the void, that leaves the family members unsettled in the house (35). The joylessness pervades all the things and humans in the house which is why Polly flees to her job and fears a collision of her work life and her home life. She cannot let the joylessness pervade her job as well. No wonder that Polly, the woman who loves the movies and is obsessed with physical beauty, falls in love with her workplace. The text says that because of the beauty of the white house “she became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs” (127).

Another way of resisting the Mammy is by telling us about Polly’s background. The text explains the history behind Polly which individualizes, and maybe even excuses, Polly’s behavior and situation. Lara Fulton claims that Pauline wears her hides under her blackness, and embraces all stereotypes “that equate it with ugliness and servitude” (34). The historical background shows us Pauline in a time before she developed a love for white ideals and a self-hate towards her blackness. It is through this historical background that we get a clearer perception of Pauline and how she is a product of her environment and background. Therefore it is impossible for her to represent all black females, as all black women have encountered different obstacles and set-backs.

We learn that Pauline Williams grew up in a red house on the countryside as the 9<sup>th</sup> of a total of 11 children. At the age of two, she hurt her foot on a rusty nail which left her with a limp. Pauline lets this deformity define her and blames it for her alienation from the rest of her family. At the age of 15 Pauline’s simple lonely hobbies of doing house chores no longer seems to fulfill her emotional needs. She hits puberty and begins to dream about strange men and soft embraces. She meets Cholly, a

young black boy who acknowledges her deformed foot instead of ignoring it. When the two get married and move to the North, Pauline feels lonely and becomes dependent on Cholly which causes him to dislike her. The dependency along with Mrs. Breedlove's new found expensive love for makeup and fashion takes a toll at their marriage. Pauline takes a day job to finance her new lifestyle which only increases the couple's marital problems, subsequently leading to the loss of her day job.

The idea of the ideal family is created by the white elite in the United States. The stereotype is created to control the general masses, but also to separate them into two great divisions: the normal and "the other." Hill Collins proposes that "two elements of the traditional family are especially problematic for African-American women" (47). The first element is the division between paid employment in the public sphere and unpaid work in the private sphere. In the United States, middle-class women are traditionally expected to be housewives and do unpaid private labor, while men are expected to perform paid labor in the public sphere. With more and more women working, black and white, many families today differ from the traditional nuclear family structure.

The first element is closely related to the second one, which are the gender roles that the division between the public and private sphere brings. Black women are considered less feminine because they work in the public sphere instead of staying at home with their children. Thus, black women compete with black men in the job market.

When Polly takes a day job, her husband feels de-masculinized. Although Cholly was previously aggravated by his wife's dependency on him, he becomes even more aggravated by her independence. The text resists the stereotype of the black woman as weak by making Polly her own caretaker, but she also reinforces the stereotype of black men as sexist. Cholly fell in love with Pauline when she had no confidence. When he suspects that she is growing a confidence and becoming her own person outside of him, he feels intimidated. Ultimately, he shows up at her job which causes her to lose it. The text is criticizing the root of sexism and identifying it as intimidation and lack of confidence. The text is also criticizing men's need to be in control of women, and describes it as irrational and childish.

When Polly asks her employer for a loan, after she has fired her, she receives the advice to leave her husband. Pauline says: "Then I got so desperate I asked her if she would loan it to me. She was quiet for a spell, and then she told me I shouldn't let a man take advantage over me. That I should have more respect, and it was my husband's duty to pay the bills, and if he couldn't, I should leave and get alimony" (120). This passage shows that these gender roles are created by a social group that already is financially set. The next few lines in the text show that these gender roles exclude people from lower

social classes such as African Americans. Polly says: “All such simple stuff. What was he gone give me alimony on? I seen she didn’t understand that all I needed from her was my eleven dollars to pay the gas man so I could cook” (120-121). Polly realizes that these are demands that sound so simple but who in reality are not. The novel is her engaging the reader to understand the class differences in society and that something that is a given to one social group can be an impossibility to another one. Her husband is so poor that he cannot even afford alimony. Polly’s top priorities are to feed herself and her husband, and she is too busy surviving that she does not have any time to think of “all such simple stuff.”

In the lower class that Polly and Cholly belong to, the financial struggles overpower and overshadow the sexist gender roles. Demanding her rights as a woman is a luxury for Polly, who does not receive all her rights as a human being. Being poor, black and a female makes Polly an open target for discrimination. Therefore the text implies that feminism cannot only circulate around gender and that it has to draw attention to social differences as well. A feminist theory that only focuses on gender inequality does not cater to the needs of women in who are discriminated for more than their gender.

Hill Collins also marks that blacks have gender specific spaces that they are confided in. She writes that after the abolition, “male space included the streets, barber shops, and pool halls; female arenas consisted of households and churches” (55). When Polly starts working, Cholly is intimidated by his wife bordering on leaving the female space. Although she is still working in a household, that household is not hers, which can jeopardize her respectability. It is not by being a Mammy that Polly jeopardizes her respectability; it is by working outside of her home. Although being a maid is generally a much accepted job for women in today’s patriarchal society, Cholly is worried that Polly might feel independent and confident enough to enter the male space, thereby blurring the boundaries of gender. The novel is here creating a sense of discomfort in the readers who have to question whether or not this is Cholly’s right as Polly’s husband. The discomfort lies in Cholly’s constant fear of Polly’s independence, he does not fear equality but he is afraid to become subordinate to her. As a black man, he is subordinate to all other racial groups and subgroups in society, except for black women. So the reader has to question whether or not his fear is understandable and can be sympathized with, and if that has any effect on our determination of what is right and wrong. The engagement of the readers together with the information we receive about the characters, makes us constantly contemplate whether or not the characters’ struggles and hardships are an excuse for their actions. Can Cholly’s actions towards his family be excused by his rough childhood and financial and racial status? Is there a fundamental right and wrong that we should all abide by, or is the decisive criterion moveable and changes regarding who commits the action?

## **The Controlling Image of the Matriarch**

Similar to the Mammy, the Matriarch is another derogatory stereotype that is created by a white male elite in order to make racist biases and prejudice seem natural. Some scholars, such as Hill Collins and Jordan-Zachery, consider the Matriarch to be a part of the Mammy, the part that lets out the frustrations. This text will analyze the Matriarch as a part of the Mammy, these two archetypes should be seen in tandem because they are found in the same character in the text. Jordan-Zachery writes that the Mammy was designed to “servile” in order to fulfil her purpose of being a servant to a white family.

Simultaneously she is aggressive “in order to maintain the status quo, in relations to other slaves to prevent their co-optation of her” (37). She was designed by white male elite as aggressive to protect the white family from dangerous black people, similar to a watch dog, but also to justify slavery and oppression of African American women. Hill Collins states that the Matriarch is the role that the black woman supposedly embodies after coming home to her black family after a long day of being the Mammy at her white family’s home. Because the working black mother spends a great deal of time away from her family, she returns to her family as a mean and aggressive person, lashing out at them as a way to release her inner aggressions that she suppressed during the day. Hill Collins writes: “From the dominant group’s perspective, the matriarch represented a failed mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant” (75).

Although the Mammy is a good woman and the Matriarch is viewed as a bad woman, the Matriarch does not undermine the Mammy stereotype. It does not make us question the legitimacy of the Mammy; instead it is a stereotype that aims to represent the radical side of the women in the black community. What white society means that is that not the conditions that the Mammy/Matriarch lives in that make her a bad woman. Instead it is something in the core of the Mammy/Matriarch that is rotten, and all her “badness” is blamed on her and not the context that she lives in, and that is why she can never remove but only suppress her Matriarch side.

The Matriarch fails at being a “good mother.” Jordan-Zachery explains that the reason why she is so nurturing and caring for the white children that she works for is because she is being supervised by her white mistress. When the Mammy is not supervised, she becomes the Matriarch. Therefore it is due to the lack of white feminine supervision that the Mammy cannot care for her own children. Being a “bad” mother makes her less of a woman, and combined with leaving her children to work and not being supported by her husband, the Mammy’s “essentially inept” (39). The Matriarch is a character that invites the readers to contemplate if Polly really is a bad mother. She provides for her

family, and she puts a roof above their heads. She does her obligations as a caretaker that the law has written for her. Still we expect her to be more loving and caring, characteristics that “good” women are supposed to have in a patriarchal society. Polly does what we expect fathers to do and she is very “male” in her interaction with her children. This makes the reader question the validity of the sexist gender roles in our society.

The Matriarch does not only fail at being a mother, as her aggressive domestic behavior leads to uneducated and criminal children that put a dent in the otherwise well-mannered primarily White society, but the Matriarch also fails at being a true woman. She does not fully adhere to the female gender role in a patriarchal society, which is why she drives off her male partners and ends up all alone as a single mother. She is too strong and “manly” to function well in a heterosexual relationship. According to hooks it is the gender inequality that has given life to this myth to weaken gender equality. She continues by explaining the impossibility of a matriarch in patriarchy, because “no matriarchy has ever existed in the United States” and a black women are not financially secure which is a condition for a matriarchy to function. Also, black women have no social or political power which is inevitable for them to be matriarchs. Jordan-Zachery writes: “But the Matriarch goes beyond being responsible for the failure of the man in her life to being responsible for the failure of her entire family. Why? Because she is both Sapphire and a mother, but a mother along the lines of Mammy” (42). Because of this seemingly false stereotype applied to the black working mother, she becomes a cautionary example of what happens when the male hegemony, no matter what race, is challenged. Typically male characteristics such as being strong and outspoken are blamed for the black women’s unfemininity, failed marriages, criminal children etc. The black woman cannot be tamed and “handled,” which is viewed in a derogatory way in a patriarchal society. hooks states that the Matriarch was used to discredit black men and women, because it told black men that they were weak whilst it told black women that they were to “manly”. This is something that we find in *The Bluest Eye* as well, where Polly is the leader of the household and the caretaker of the family and her husband is very insecure and financially provided for. Although the Matriarch myth is untrue and negative, black women still embraced it because they saw themselves as privileged within the black community (hooks, 81).

The focus on the black woman’s characteristics leads to the roots of the problem, which are societal injustice and economic and race differences, to be overlooked. By applying the belittling stereotype of the Matriarch to the socially oppressed black woman, the white woman is being scared off from adopting the characteristics of strength and independence (Hill Collins, 77). Although I do agree with this statement, I think this is only a “bonus” and that the real reason is to exploit and oppress black women.

Pauline Breedlove seemingly fits into the image of the Matriarch. She picks fights with her partner Cholly and enjoys the outbursts. The narrator says:

The tiny, undistinguished days that Mrs. Breedlove lived were identified, grouped, and classed by these quarrels. They gave substance to the minutes and hours otherwise dim and unrecalled. They relieved the tiresomeness of poverty, gave grandeur to the dead rooms. In these violent breaks in routine that were themselves routine, she could display the style and imagination of what she believed to be her own true self (41).

Polly not only enjoys the excitement of the quarrels, she also enjoys imagining herself to be a Christian martyr who patiently accepts her destiny. She also seems indifferent to the effect her and her husband's violent fights have on her children. Her son Sammy has, by the age of fourteen, run away from home a total of twenty-seven times and on one of these occasions he stays away for three whole months. Her daughter Pecola experiences highly morbid fantasies about the death of her parents, or herself. Unfortunately, none of this seems to stop Pauline from creating and perpetuating the violence in her home. This is seemingly similar to the Matriarch who is essentially violent, who has to exercise emotional and physical abuse in order to feel good.

Similar to the text's resistance of the Mammy, the text also resists the image of the Matriarch by giving the reader a historical background as to why Mrs. Breedlove acts the way she does. The text says that the ugliness of the Breedloves was predetermined. It was an ugliness that they could not resist, they had to accept it, embody it and conform to it. The ugliness was, as the narrator puts it, their conviction. The text says:

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." (39).

By describing the Breedlove's situation as a conviction handed to them, forced upon them, the text is educating the reader about how the Breedloves from the beginning were expected and supposed to fail. In the race of life, they began behind the starting line, which therefore excuses or at least explains the actions of Pauline Breedlove and the rest of her family. This is a clear resistance of the Matriarch who is supposed to be violent and angry because of her blackness, this passage instead explains how the historical aspects form the person which complicates the simplicity of the stereotypical image. The "all-

knowing master” is the white elite that create these stereotypes. But the text not only blames that minority in power, it also blames society as a whole. The ugliness of the Breedloves was confirmed by media but also by the American people, as none of the people around them could contradict the statement of ugliness. Instead they, or as the narrator puts it “every glance,” supported it. Lara Fulton informs us that the Breedloves accept the white perception of them because our society normalizes white values (27). Are they that innocent?

Amanda Putnam writes about the frustrated female characters in Morrison’s works and says that violence is a way for them to “refuse socialized gender and racial identities that attempt to constrain them”. Also, Putnam explains, the violence does not origin in the black women: it is merely a reprojection of the oppression that they suffer. By acting out their frustrations of being handed this cloak of ugliness, black women “redefine themselves as compellingly dominant women”.

The text refuses to blame the actions of the Matriarch, and all other stereotypes created to undermine Black women, on the Matriarch alone. The evil that the Matriarch produces does not originate from the black mother; it is projected on to her from her surroundings. Therefore the blame for her actions is not on the Matriarch alone but it is on the whole of the American society.

The society’s limiting view on beauty also affects how the Breedloves view each other. The narrator says that Pauline is obsessed with categorizing faces according to conventional beauty, which she learnt from the movies. Kuenz states regarding Pauline’s fascination with the movies that it is the absence of alternative portrayals of beauty and of a social network “whose own lives would provide a differing model and the context in which to erect her own,” that Polly has to turn to the movies (426).

Pauline, like many others, has been taught to see beauty in an exclusionary way. Her view of beauty is an ideal that is impossible for her to achieve. She feels the need to categorize the people surrounding her by beauty, because she equates physical appearances with virtue. The text describes physical beauty as an idea that has “originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion” (122). So the idea of ideal beauty that we are being taught to imitate and to strive to attain is destructive and that excludes the majority of colored people. When Polly is at the movies watching a Clark Gable and Jean Harlow film, she does her best to imitate the female character. She fixes her hair similar to Harlow and she feels beautiful. That feeling however, only remains for a few moments because just as Polly is biting in to her hard candy, she loses her front tooth. At that moment Polly realizes the impossibility for her to become beautiful, or at least beautiful like Jean Harlow. The text says that it was after that that “the meanness got worse” (123). Her missing front tooth leads to her husband making fun of her which results in a very violent domestic space. Fulton writes that the brown tooth symbolizes the

subtle way that racism poisons African-American identity, and “the ‘conditions’ which act as a prerequisite for Pauline's erosion of identity” are her alienation from her family and society (37). I agree with this and I would also like to add that the un-noticeability of the erosion symbolizes the most people do not realize how effected they really are by media. The narrator explains that today’s beauty ideals also rot the minds of the men who themselves contribute to the emotional abuse of “unattractive” women. The narrative technique works in the way that it as the story goes on draws us further and further in, and the closer we get to Polly the more her weak appears. She might seem powerful in the private sphere but she is merely acting out her frustrations from being oppressed in both the private and public sphere.

Although Mrs. Breedlove is not among the “beautiful” elite, she has still adopted society’s conception of the ideal beauty. The text says that the movies taught Polly to beauty, but also to hate everything that was not beautiful. When Polly is pregnant with her daughter Pecola, she expresses tremendous excitement and she speaks to her at all times. She says: “I used to talk to it whilst it be still in the womb. Like good friends we was” (124). She loves her baby and she cannot wait to see it. When the baby is born, Polly’s reaction is: “But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126). All the excitement and maternal love is overpowered by Polly’s strong views on beauty and virtue. Because Mrs. Breedlove has learnt all there is to love and all there is to hate from movies conveying the message of the ideal beauty, she immediately hates her daughter. The movies never taught her how to love black girls.

It was quite the opposite; there were no black girls at all in the movies and on TV. The lack of colored girls in popular media is noticeable in the scene where the young Claudia expresses a great sense of hatred against the white Shirley Temple. She says: “I couldn’t join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me” (19).

Claudia hates Shirley, not because she envies her for her conventional beauty, but because she is a white girl dancing with a black man. She feels that she is the one who should be dancing with Bojangles; he is black like her and it is her right as she has no hope of dancing with a white man. Claudia also hates Shirley because of how perfect she seems. She is a little beautiful white girl with whose socks never slide off, which is very unrealistic and almost theatrical. Claudia cannot identify with her and knowing that she can never be that perfect aggravates her. Lastly, she hates Shirley for all the attention that she gets. She gets the attention from seemingly the whole nation, including the black Mr. Bojangles, Pecola Breedlove and Frieda MacTeer. Shirley gets all that attention which leaves no room

for attention for little black girls like Claudia MacTeer. Amanda Putnam claims that Claudia MacTeer feels that something has been stolen from her, which is her presence in the performance. This, in addition to the white dolls she is gifted, makes her feel invisible. She writes that “by dismembering them, she disrupts the obsessive desire to worship white/light attributes, rejecting them for her own blackness. She rebels against white oppression, forcing others to see her and not a reflection of whiteness”. The narrator invites the reader to resist the white idolization that is being forced upon Claudia by initially making her reaction seem exaggerated and childish. She seems envious of Shirley Temple because she uses the strong word “hate”, and speaks of Bojangles as “hers” 3 times in the same sentence. But the narrator continues by describing an incident where Claudia is gifted some white dolls. She reacts to them by dismembering them because of the great discomfort that they make her feel. We are taken aback as readers by how afraid of and disgusted by the young black girl is of the white dolls. It no longer seems childish; Claudia is clearly expressing true hatred. The novel disrupts our reading with the strong sense of hatred which forces us to decide whether or not it is valid. It gives us the option to reject the power of the white patriarchy by these seemingly trivial themes that provoke powerful gestures in the characters.

Kuenz builds upon this and adds that Claudia hates the presence of Mr. Bojangles in the films and the unrealistic role that he plays. The TV-show rewrites reality by making an older black man the friend of a young white girl as an attempt, not to portray the experiences of being black during the Civil War, but to erase and deny the horrible oppression of blacks during that time.

Claudia’s reaction is reminiscent of Fanon words: “Society, unlike biochemical processes, does not escape human influence. Man is what brings society into being. The prognosis is in the hands of those who are prepared to shake the worm-eaten foundations of the edifice” (Introduction/ xv). So it is humans who created and institutionalized racism and it is little girls like Claudia MacTeer who can shake these “worm-eaten foundations”.

It is no surprise that Pauline is kind, loving and nurturing at her job, and the total opposite in her own home, because she is taught to love the people and the lifestyle of her job while she is taught to despise the blackness, ugliness and poverty of the people in her home. She naturally expresses this love by being joyous and motherly, and she expresses her hatred in producing violence and more hatred. Therefore it is not really surprising that Polly physically abuses Pecola and motherly soothes the White girl in the same moment, when Pecola drops the blueberry pie at her mother’s workplace.

The abusive (lack of) mothering that Polly practices can also be seen as a way for her to teach her daughter Pecola about her subordination. In a society where black women are from the lowest

of social classes, the same society that broke down the hopes and dreams of the once optimistic Pauline Williams, there is no room for a black girl to be hopeful. Therefore the violence that Polly subjects her daughter to could be seen as preparatory for Pecola's future. Putnam claims that this can be seen as "an instinctive message teaching black children coping mechanisms within a world that denies and exploits their self-worth".

### **Other Images of Motherhood in *The Bluest Eye***

- **Mrs. MacTeer**

Mrs. MacTeer is the mother of Frieda and Claudia MacTeer. She is a woman who loves to sing the blues. Her relationship to her two daughters is a loving but strict one. The girls never speak unless spoken to, or else they might get whipped. Mrs. MacTeer nonetheless loves her daughters fiercely which has made them strong young girls. The narrator, Claudia, tells us about when she was got sick after a school trip:

No one speaks to me or asks how I feel. In an hour or two my mother comes. Her hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks salve on my chest, I am rigid with pain. She takes two fingers' full of it at a time, and massages my chest until I am faint. Just when I think I will tip over into a scream, she scoops out a little of the salve on her forefinger and puts it in my mouth, telling me to swallow. A hot flannel is wrapped about my neck and chest. I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do—promptly (11).

So even though Claudia feels neglected, we as readers understand that her mother cares for her sick daughter. The novel is foregrounding the notion that the Mammy, Matriarch and all other reductive stereotypes can act in ways outside the stereotypical way. The stereotypical image can either be false and inapplicable to the character, or it can simply be a part of the character and not be what defines him/her. Also, Morrison celebrates womanhood and motherhood in this novel. In passages like this, there is a disconnection between feminist theory and the text, because the theoretical analysis of the quote above would be that Mrs. MacTeer is oppressed as a woman and that she is simply acting the way the patriarchy wants her to. It is in passages like this that the reader is invited to form his own opinion outside of the text, especially since this passage celebrates motherhood and other passages portray motherhood and womanhood in a more theoretical light. When Claudia grows up, she understands the value of her mothers nurturing and she realizes that she has a mother who is loving and kind. She says:

But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. (12).

Amanda Putnam claims that although Mrs. MacTeer and her daughters have a loving and nurturing relationship, there still are some acts of emotional abuse that we as readers get to learn about. She says that even good mothers can abuse their children, which will teach them to repeat this abuse.

The MacTeer family seems to be in the same socio-economic class as the Breedloves. Their home is as old and cold as the Breedloves', with only one large room lit up by a lamp. The rest of the house is dark and is inhabited by roaches and mice. Also, both families are black. Although the families at first glance might look very similar, there is a difference in the mothers and how they mother their children. Mrs. MacTeer is very harsh and firm, but equally loving and protective. In the text, there are many passages where we read about how Mrs. MacTeer takes care of her daughters. On the other hand, there is no passage in the text where Mrs. Breedlove shows any sign of mothering towards her daughter. Polly and Pecola do not seem to have any relationship. Also, Polly does not return to bring her daughter home after the MacTeers have taken her in. This also affects the girls, as Frieda and Claudia are seemingly strong and confident, whilst Pecola is weak and ends up mad. Fulton writes that "the crucial difference that enables Claudia to challenge white ideological values while Pecola is systematically destroyed by them is the degree of stability and self-love fostered within their home environments." (32-33)

The reasons why the two mothers are so different are many, but one of them is that Mrs. MacTeer shares the burden of parenting with her husband, Mr. MacTeer, who is equally loving and protective towards his daughters. Polly, on the other hand, has to take the burden all alone, which in addition to her other social challenges, leads to her neglecting her responsibilities as a mother. Cholly is an alcoholic, unemployed black man who is as burdening as a child himself. He cannot aid his wife in any way or form.

Also, Pauline Breedlove cannot love her black daughter if she cannot love the blackness in herself. As mentioned above, Polly has a set idea of what beauty is, and more importantly, what beauty is not. She sees beauty in the pale blonde locks and blue eyes of Jean Harlow; therefore she cannot see beauty in her coarse dark hair, dark eyes and dark skin. She cannot see beauty in darkness which is why

she immediately reacted to the unattractiveness of her new born daughter. Not only can Polly not love her daughter Pecola, she cannot instill any sort of self-love and self-confidence in her either, she can only break it down. Polly Breedlove is too weak to raise a strong black girl. Fulton writes about a passage in *The Bluest Eye* where Claudia describes her mother and then comments on it. She says that Claudia learns to love herself, and defy white ideology, by her mother. Claudia tries to teach Pecola to also love herself but it is unfortunately too late (33).

- **China, Poland and Miss Marie**

These are the three prostitutes who live in the apartment above the Breedloves. They are the friends of Pecola Breedlove and she visits them and run their errands. Pecola Breedlove loves the three whores, and they enjoy her company. They give her cute nicknames and joke with her. The women are happy and enjoy life; they banter with each other and laugh. Although the three women are outspoken and vocal about their thoughts, they still censor their conversations when Pecola is around. The text describes them as strong women who have taken control of their own bodies and sexuality. The narrator says the women hated all men, “without shame, apology, or discrimination” and that they found them to be “inadequate and weak” (56).

Also, the narrator continues, “they were whores in whores’ clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence. With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other. Marie concocted stories for her because she was a child, but the stories were breezy and rough. If Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voiced any alarm” (57).

Although the three prostitutes are not mothers as far as we know, they have many motherly attributes that they project onto Pecola. They listen to her and they speak with her and not at her, which is what her own mother does. This is also something that forces the readers to think about why they expect Mrs. Breedlove to be so motherly. We expect her to play the role that the patriarchy has designed for her, which is the same patriarchy that also forced her in to the reductive stereotypes that we have discussed above. Also, the prostitutes tell Pecola about their lives in all honesty, although censored, which makes her feel like a member of their dysfunctional but happy family. This is the opposite of how she is treated by her own mother, who never speaks to her, never listens to her. Pecola is more of a prop than a family member in the store front home of the Breedloves.

- **Geraldine**

The narrator describes Geraldine, and other African American women from the lower middle class, as thin, tall and beautiful. The text says: “such girls live in quiet black neighborhoods where everybody is

gainfully employed” (82), so they are not poor like Polly Breedlove. The narrator describes these “sugar-brown” women as different from their black sisters. They are less nervous and uncomfortable, because they have not been through as much as their black sisters. These lower middle class African American women care for their appearances and study at colleges to learn how they are supposed to behave, to differentiate themselves from their black sisters. Fanon explains the mindset of these exclusive “sugar-brown” women by giving us the example of the mulatta, who also is from a group who is considered to be black but the “good kind of black.” He says: “The mulatto woman wants not only to become white but also to avoid slipping back. What in fact is more illogical than a mulatto woman marrying a black man? For you have to understand once and for all that it’s a question of saving the race” (37). He continues writing about the people who distance themselves from their race: “So here is our returnee. He can no longer understand Creole; he talks of the Opera House, which he has probably seen only from a distance; but most of all he assumes a critical attitude toward his fellow islanders. He reacts differently at the slightest pretext. He knows everything. He proves himself through his language” (8). Although it might seem as if Fanon is blaming the black man or woman for leaving their people and culture, he is actually explaining that this behavior is the result of the racism that they suffer. He writes: “After everything that has just been said, it is easy to understand why the first reaction of the black man is to say no to those who endeavor to define him. It is understandable that the Black man’s first action is a reaction, and since he is assessed with regard to his degree of assimilation, it is understandable too why the returning Antillean speaks only French: because he is striving to underscore the right that has occurred. He embodies a new type of man whom he imposes on his colleagues and family. His old mother no longer understands when he speaks of her pj’s, her ramshackle dump, and her lousy joint. All that embellished with the appropriate accent”(19).

Geraldine is one of these black women who resent their fellow African American sisters; she is incapable of loving or even pitying them. She, like her brown skinned sisters, is incapable of letting go of this white mask that she has put on: therefore she cannot enjoy fleshly and sensual activities such as sex and so she only feels any sort of affection towards her cat. She loves him sensually, more than her husband and even her son, Junior. The lack of affection that she shows her son results in Junior routinely torturing the cat and abusing other children. When Junior meets Pecola, he invites her to her house only to abuse her by throwing his mother’s cat in her face and locking her in the room. When he opens the door and sees the cat delighted at being petted by Pecola, Junior becomes furious and abuses the cat to death. When Geraldine walks in to the room, Junior blames Pecola for the death of the cat. Geraldine sees Pecola, and in her blackness she sees all the black girls she had seen all her life. Black girls who were dirty, poor and different from colored girls like herself. The same black girls she had

struggled to avoid and become like, and now this black girl was in her house. In all madness Geraldine says: “Get out,” she said, her voice quiet. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house” (92). Fulton writes that Geraldine’s “valorization of white cultural values” can be seen in her love for the clean and quiet, blue-eyed cat. The black cats blue eyes “signify the realization of the beauty myth” that Geraldine, Polly and many others in the black community aspire (47).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this essay shows how *The Bluest Eye* resists stereotypical images of African-American women by a narrative technique that makes us inhabit the text in order to complicate the characters and to break down the archetypes. We are informed of the historical background of Pauline Breedlove as well as the social context that she lives in today, which are two factors that have greatly impacted her as a black woman and mother. Also, this analysis shows the destructive power of white cultural values, such as beauty and family, and how they breed self-hatred in the people that it secludes. Lastly, this text shows the intersection between the two systems of oppression: sexism and racism, and how the two in conjunction make black women one of the most oppressed sub-groups in society.

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