

The Color Aesthetic Under Oppression—Oppression—The Analysis of *The Bluest Eye* From Foucault Discourse Power Theory

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In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison describes a black society under a deformed aesthetic system. This aesthetic mode is a kind of ideology constructed by the white society through the political system and power. Most of the characters in the book are tamed by this mainstream idea: white skin and blue eyes-oriented aesthetic, which is also the tragedy origin of the protagonist Pecola. Foucault's theory of discourse power profoundly discusses the formation and effects of discourse power, a new way of controlling the lower class. This paper, based on the two operations of disciplinary power, the effects of discourse power, and the resistance of it, interprets how the white aesthetic becomes the mainstream aesthetic, its oppression on the black individuals and groups and their resistance of such power through the three characters of Peal, a brown girl, Pecola, a black girl and Claudia, the narrator, in the hope that the black race can acquire awakening consciousness, break the discourse power behind the mainstream aesthetic, and realize the self-confidence of skin color and race.

Keywords: *The Bluest Eye*, Foucault, discourse power, color aesthetic

Peal's High-Yellow Skin: The Incarnation of White Aesthetic

As a brown girl, Maureen Peal is regarded as the most beautiful girl and is proud of her light skin and blue eyes, which caters to the white aesthetic. The common view of her beauty stems from the discourse power of white society; thus, Peal is an incarnation of aesthetic.

Hierarchical Observation

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible. (Foucault, 1978, p. 172)

Hierarchical observation is in the primary level of disciplinary power, in which the traditional meaning of buildings has been changed from the existence of viewing to a kind of hidden training institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and communities. Here, "each gaze would be from a part of the overall functioning of power" (Foucault, 1978, p. 173). In *The Bluest Eye*, Peal is a transfer student with brown skin. She is very beautiful, "there was a hint of spring in her sole green eyes" (Morrison, 1994, p. 62) and rich, "as rich as the richest of the white girls" (Morrison, 1994, p. 62). At this moment, the school is a monitoring organization, and

people's attention is focused on the light-skinned Peal, which makes Peal become the embodiment of beauty. Morrison wrote "she enchanted the entire school" (Morrison, 1994, p. 62); thus the teacher encourages her with smile, the boys would not make fun of her, and white girls are willing to become partners with her. The attitude of people around her shows that Peal is the most beautiful girl in the book. In fact, what people respects is not Peal herself, but the white aesthetic brand on her. The white society's discipline to the black people is reflected in all aspects. Politically, it is clearly stipulated that the black people lack all kinds of rights. In life, the black people consciously form a black community and carefully keep distance with the white people. In aesthetic aspect, the black people unconsciously cater to the white skin and blue eyes aesthetic. There is no white girl image in the book, so the surroundings set by Morrison like school or the community all belong to the black group. Peal, who is just similar to white people, is given such generous kindness and praise by the people around, showing deep imprint of white culture left on the black people.

Normalizing Judgement

"The distribution according to ranks or grade has a double role: it marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills and aptitudes; but it also punishes and rewards" (Foucault, 1978, p. 183). Normalizing judgement is a kind of means to achieve equality through reward and punishment system, which grades everything according to a fixed standard. Obviously, this dual system is still an unfair judgement in essence, just an excuse for the privileged class to discipline the lower class. All behaviors that do not conform to the mainstream culture and thought will be regulated by punishment until everything is in line with the mainstream culture. In *The Bluest Eye*, Peal is not only regarded as the embodiment of beauty by others, but she herself thinks that her light skin is more advanced and beautiful than other black skin in the unfair grading system. On the way to school, Peal went along with Pecola and Claudia sisters. When they talked about Pecola's father, Peal called Pecola's father as "her old black Daddy" (Morrison, 1994, p. 73). The scorn and disdain in her tone separated her from other black people. Claudia was aware of this hierarchical superiority, so she had a fierce quarrel with Peal. Peal said that "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (Morrison, 1994, p. 73). Pecola, sensitive and self-abased, after hearing these words, "folded into herself" (Morrison, 1994, p. 73), hiding herself, because under the unfair normalization, she is the lowest and ugliest rank, which does not conform to the so-called norms of white skin and blue eyes. Therefore, Pecola is excluded by her classmates and despised by her mother. As Claudia said, "The thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us" (Morrison, 1994, p. 74); the thing here refers the discourse power realized by the disciplinary operations, which belongs to the white society. Under the guidance of this discourse power, Peal has become the embodiment of the white aesthetic. The suppression of this white discourse makes the black community numbly submit to and advocate white-oriented aesthetic, and lose their own subjective consciousness, which is a tragic for a nation.

The Effects of Black: Pecola's Collapse Under Aesthetic Oppression

Pecola's longing for blue eyes shows the internalized aesthetic view of black people and it is such inner oppression that leads to her destruction both physically and mentally.

The Invisible Body

In *The Bluest Eye*, the whole black community is subject to the mainstream thoughts oriented by white aesthetic. Peal, for instance, is in the highest position, while the protagonist Pecola, with her dark skin and ugly appearance, is at the bottom of this level. The result of this kind of discipline is that the black people suffer both

physically and spiritually, and Pecola is destroyed in the white aesthetic mode. First, her dark skin and ugliness make her an invisible man. Pecola's family is labeled as ugly, "they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (Morrison, 1994, p. 38). The aesthetic mode internalized in Pecola's family is the source of the label that brand on them. Pecola is always used to hiding behind her ugly mask when she get into trouble, because under the influence of her family, school, and society, she has been taught that white skin and blue eyes are right. In school, the boys do not bully Pecola outrageously until the appearance of Peal, because the boys do not want to leave a bad impression in front of the beautiful Peal. Then there is the quarrel mentioned in the first chapter. Peal not only insults Pecola's father, but also indirectly expresses her contempt for black skin, but Pecola never retorts, even a word has not been issued. She just falls into a deep inferiority complex, hiding herself like a transparent person. Pecola lives in an inharmonious family atmosphere, in which her parents have a bad relationship with frequent quarrel and fight. Pecola prays to God to make herself disappear, but "try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear" (Morrison, 1994, p. 45). As long as she is ugly, she cannot escape anything that happens in front of her eyes. Finally, she realizes that as long as she has a pair of blue eyes, she will get the privilege of being beautiful, and everything will be different, so "she prayed for blue eyes, Fervently, for a year she had prayed" (Morrison, 1994, p. 46). In the candy store, the white owner ignores Pecola's existence, "and it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes" (Morrison, 1994, p. 49), which undoubtedly makes Pecola feel ashamed. The triple vision of family, school, and white society makes Pecola an invisible person. Effected by this kind of aesthetic mode, Pecola dislikes her skin, appearance, and body, tries to escape from reality through a pair of blue eyes, and lets herself be seen by others.

The Collapse of Soul

In the end, Pecola was pushed into the life abyss due to her father's destruction and the priest's lies. Pecola's body was destroyed and her spirit was broken. After being raped by her father, there was not any psychological description of her, but the psychological shadow was left in Pecola's mind. At the end of the story, Pecola became insane and fell into her own fantasy. In the world of her own imagination, Pecola got the blue eyes she was always longing for and talked to an imaginary friend who constantly praises her blue eyes. Most of the themes they repeatedly mentioned were blue eyes, then followed by her father's evil deeds. Under the beautiful blue eyes, all the previous unhappiness was almost gone, but only her father's violence against her cannot be erased from her mind. When she was pregnant, Pecola found the soap head priest, hoping to get blue eyes to get rid of her pain with the help of God's power. The priest asked her to poison a dog and cheated her if the dog behaves abnormally, her wish would come true. Though the dog was poisoned to death, Pecola did not get blue eyes, her last hope had been dashed, and the tragedy of a black girl who was dedicated to pursuing the white aesthetic came to an end. Pecola is engulfed in the cold white aesthetic mode, which always lingers in her life, from the invisible person to the soul of destruction. The purpose of white power discourse is to distort people's thought and values, makes them become "docile body", then controls their mind, confiscates their discourse, and trains them as the oppressed side forever.

Claudia's Resistance to Discourse Power

Power and resistance coexist according to Foucault's theory of discourse power. Where there is power, the voice of resistance will inevitably turn up. Although most of the black people are permeated by the white

aesthetic, Morrison does not want to present a completely dark and numb black nation to the readers. Claudia, the narrator of the story, is the hope infused into the black community. Claudia's quarrel with Peal, her hatred for white doll's beauty and her rebellious thoughts are out of accord with other black people, so she represents the voice of resistance against the white society's discourse power.

The Resistance of White Doll

Claudia seems to be born with hostility and dislike for white skin. For example, on every Christmas day, Claudia will receive a doll with white skin and blue eyes. She cannot understand why people around her are so fond of the doll. What she wants is to "sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone" (Morrison, 1994, p. 22). The traditional family life is what she yearns for, not the blue-eyed dolls. Though Pecola is disgusted by everyone, she is well treated by Claudia and a real friend of her. Claudia never makes any comments on her appearance and skin color, and even helps Pecola refute Peal when Peal insults her father. Claudia's kindness to Pecola and her disapproval of white skin seems to be normal in the black community; however, due to the influence of abnormal aesthetic, the thoughts of Claudia goes against most black people around her who dislike their skin color and advocate white skin. At last, Claudia broke down the doll which symbolizes the white mainstream culture. Although she was reprimanded by adults, she made a different voice under the normative thought, which was the resistance to the disciplinary power of white society.

The Resistance of White Aesthetic

After Pecola gave birth to her baby, people talked about her maliciously that "two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly" (Morrison, 1994, p. 190), while Claudia "looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils" (Morrison, 1994, p. 190). In the distorted black society, there is only indifference and ridicule among the black groups, and the internal cohesion of the black nation is completely destroyed. Through Claudia's words, the importance of resisting the discourse power of the white people has been revealed. Only in this way can the black people regain their own discourse power, reconstruct the black society, and then achieve national self-improvement.

Conclusion

With the interpretation of *The Bluest Eye* under Foucault's discourse power theory, there is a deeper understanding of how the black race has become the slave of the white mainstream thought under the discipline of the white aesthetic. Through two kinds of disciplinary operations of hierarchical observation and normalizing judgement, the black group has completed the internalization of the white aesthetic, and their judgement to others represents the disgust of the black culture and the pursuit of white culture. Peal gains public recognition with her light skin, which is the hint of white society's successful discipline to black people. At the same time, it can also see the painful harm that the discourse power brings to them. Pecola's desire for blue eyes and the destruction of her soul are not only her tragedy, but also the tragedy of the whole black nation. Therefore, only by breaking this single aesthetic and the discourse power of the white people, like Claudia, can the whole nation break the shackles and reshape the national spirit confidence.

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