

10-16-2021

The Application of the Symbol of the Mask in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *We Wear the Mask* to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: Racial Microstressors, Intergenerational Trauma, and Resilience Factors Through a Literary Lens

Tyler Rhea

University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences, threa@usa.edu

Author(s) ORCID Identifier:

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3422-0696>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://soar.usa.edu/other>

Recommended Citation

Rhea, T. (2021, October 14-16). *The application of the symbol of the mask in Paul Laurence Dunbar's We Wear the Mask to Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye: Racial microstressors, intergenerational trauma, and resilience factors through a literary lens*, [Conference presentation paper]. 2021 Annual Conference of the Society for Comparative Literature and the Arts, Austin, TX.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty and Staff Research at SOAR @ USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Other Topics by an authorized administrator of SOAR @ USA. For more information, please contact soar@usa.edu, erobinson@usa.edu.

University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences

The Application of the Symbol of the Mask in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *We Wear the Mask* to
Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: Racial Microstressors, Intergenerational Trauma, and Resilience
Factors Through a Literary Lens

Tyler Rhea

16 October 2021

Abstract

This article identifies the mechanisms of racial microstressors, intergenerational transmission of trauma, and societally-imposed repression in Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *We Wear the Mask*. These mechanisms form a cycle of racial trauma that coalesces into Dunbar's symbol of the mask. The cycle represented by the mask is then applied to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which elaborates further on the personal experience and negative effects of the process of racial trauma that is identified in the poem. Examples of racial microstressors are evidenced in the novel through the presence of both negative interpersonal interactions and media messages privileging whites over blacks. Intergenerational trauma is identified through the transmission of internalized white beauty standards from parent to child and the negative psychic effect that this has on children in the novel, such as Pecola Breedlove. It is noted that a difference exists between Dunbar's depiction of societally-imposed repression and Morrison's use of the mask to depict not only repression, but also the social role of a scapegoat. Despite the overwhelming trauma evident in both *We Wear the Mask* and *The Bluest Eye*, it is concluded that hope for resilience still exists. In the poem this hope comes primarily in the form of community and social support. In the novel, hopes instead exists through the secure sibling relationship between Claudia and Frieda McTeer.

Keywords: Dunbar, Morrison, racial microstressor, intergenerational trauma

The Application of the Symbol of the Mask in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *We Wear the Mask* to
Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *We Wear the Mask* features several powerful images illustrating racial pain. However, there is an absence of an isolated traumatic event, such as a physical assault. Conceptualizing the work from a trauma studies perspective, both racial microstressors and intergenerational trauma instead appear to converge in the poem. The cycle of racial microstressors and the intergenerational transmission of trauma that Dunbar represents through the symbol of the mask can also be found in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

Racial microstressors are present in *The Bluest Eye* in the form of negative interpersonal interactions and media messages privileging whites over blacks. The trauma that is caused by an accumulation of these microstressors is passed from parent to child in the novel, primarily in the form of internalized white beauty standards. These white beauty standards lead characters such as Pecola Breedlove and Claudia and Frieda McTeer to associate themselves with ugliness and therefore also with other negative traits, such as "inborn depravity, laziness, carelessness, irresponsibility, aggressiveness, illiteracy, docility" (Miniotaitte 51). These negative self-associations obliterate the developing self-esteem of Pecola Breedlove, and arguably Claudia and Frieda McTeer, foreshadow a lifetime of their own self-devaluation not only in regards to physical appearance, but also in other domains such as perceived occupational competence and academic performance.

Racial Microstressors

Dunbar does not mention a major episode of discrimination in the poem, but instead appears to reference racial microstressors or "the cumulative effect of everyday discrimination"

(Kogan et al. 899). These racial microstressors are more “subtle forms of discrimination,” such as “being ignored, overlooked, or mistreated in ways that lead to feelings of demoralization and dehumanization” (Nadal et al. 6; Kogan et al. 899). Looking at the line “With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,” the hearts Dunbar describes would not have suffered these tears all at once (Dunbar 4). Instead, the wounds would have been inflicted one at a time, each seemingly minor and bearable, until the cumulative effect became unbearable. Kogan et al. note that while acute incidents of racial trauma are relatively rare, racial microstressors are exceedingly common and can result in a greater psychological cost over time than a major incident (899). This is further substantiated by research which shows that “individuals who observed subtle discrimination scenarios had higher cardiovascular responses than those who observed scenarios that were blatantly racist” (Nadal et al. 7).

Another image that Dunbar utilizes in the poem that further supports this sense of cumulative damage is “Why should the world be over-wise / In counting all our tears and sighs” (Dunbar 6-7). The use of the word ‘tears’ in these lines has a dual meaning, with both potential usages supporting the theme of multiple minor psychic injuries accumulating to deal critical damage to the subject. The first usage is ‘tears’, as in the previous line “With torn and bleeding hearts we smile” (Dunbar 4). However, there is also the potential usage of the word to mean tears produced while weeping. This also supports the theme of an accumulation of small damages, as tears fall one drop at a time. While both meanings of the word ‘tears’ support Dunbar’s position, the dual meaning serves to strengthen it further. This dual meaning also speaks to the simultaneous emotional and physical effects of racial microstressors. Nadal et al. found that in addition to the psychological damage wreaked by racial microstressors, “being a repeated target

of racial microaggressions is connected to poorer physical health” (12). The researchers go on to list various potential physical health consequences of microaggressions, including low energy, fatigue, and pain (Nadal et al. 12-13).

Racial microstressors are extremely prevalent throughout *The Bluest Eye*, manifesting themselves in the form of both negative interpersonal interactions and media messages privileging whites over blacks. A prime example of a racial microstressor in the form of a negative interpersonal interaction is Pecola Breedlove’s encounter with the shopkeeper, Mr. Yacobowski. Pecola is attempting to purchase some candy and at first has difficulty even getting the attention of Mr. Yacobowski, saying that “He senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance,” and that “He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see” (Morrison 655). This lines up well with the definition from Kogan et al. of a microstressor as being ignored or overlooked (899). Pecola notes that this is not new to her. She says, “she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes ... She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness” (Morrison 666). The disgust lurking in the eyes of Mr. Yacobowski that Pecola describes serves as a nonverbal and subtle confirmation of Pecola’s perception of herself as ugly.

Pecola eventually gets the attention of Mr. Yacobowski and attempts to select the candy she wants by pointing at it. Mr. Yacobowski’s reaction is to say, “Christ. Kantcha talk?” (Morrison 666). This question adds an accusation not only of ugliness, but also stupidity to the damage inflicted on Pecola during this interaction. The final blow dealt to Pecola in this scene is when Mr. Yacobowski displays disgust when having to touch Pecola’s hand to take the money for the candy. Pecola observes that “He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand” (Morrison 676).

Pecola is left with the upwelling of an “inexplicable shame” (676). The tragedy of this is that not only is Pecola exceptionally vulnerable to the damage of these racial microstressors as a child, but she is also unable to fully comprehend or adequately cope with them.

_____As soon as Pecola is finally free of Mr. Yacobowski, she is faced with yet another microstressor in the form of a media message. The candy that Pecola has purchased is wrapped in “A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named” (Morrison 666). The image of Mary Jane has a “Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort” (Morrison 666). This marketing sends Pecola the message that Mary Jane is what a beautiful young girl looks like, and that through her difference Pecola is ugly. This message reinforces the nonverbal communication of ugliness and disgust from Mr. Yacobowski. _

Another media-related microstressor appears in the scene where Frieda brings Pecola graham crackers and milk. Claudia says, “Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” (Morrison 271). Pecola’s preoccupation with the Shirley Temple cup exposes the degree to which she has internalized majority beauty standards. However, every encounter she has with a symbol of white beauty, like Shirley Temple, also acts as a racial microstressor, cementing her internalized racism and the trauma that this confers on her throughout the novel.

Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma is another mechanism of trauma evidenced in Dunbar’s poem. Knight defines intergenerational trauma as “the notion that parents transfer their unprocessed

trauma to their children” (128). Knight goes on to say that the effect of this is the continuation of a cycle of “unresolved intergenerational distress” (128). This concept is integral to a complete understanding of *We Wear the Mask* from a trauma studies perspective. Primarily, Dunbar was far from the only one to suffer the racial microstressors evidenced in the poem. Dunbar’s parents and family would have also been subject to racial microstressors and passed any unresolved trauma on to him. In addition, Dunbar does not use the singular pronoun ‘I’, but opts instead for plural pronouns, such as ‘we’ and ‘our’. This reflects a deliberate recognition by Dunbar of his plight as an intergenerational and systemic condition common to all black Americans at the time.

Intergenerational trauma transmission can also be found in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. The main process through which this takes place is the passing of internalized white beauty standards from one generation to the next. An example of this transference of internalized white beauty standards is found in the relationship between Pauline and Pecola Breedlove. The narrator describes that while she was pregnant Pauline went to the movies and there “Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another-physical beauty ... In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap” (Morrison 1569). When Pauline gives birth to Pecola she transmits this self-contempt to her child. Pauline says that Pecola had “*Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly*” (Morrison 1618). By immediately declaring Pecola ugly upon birth, Pauline begins the transmission of her own unresolved trauma caused by internalized white beauty standards to her daughter.

Pecola is the character most negatively affected by internalized white beauty standards in the novel. However, Claudia has a higher initial self-worth and rejects the white beauty standard

before eventually succumbing to it over time. This makes Claudia an instructive case in the process of intergenerational transmission of white beauty standards.

Claudia receives what she describes as, “a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll” (Morrison 283). Claudia says that the adults assumed that “the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish” (Morrison 283). Initially, she resists the imposition of the white Baby Doll, which acts as a symbol of white beauty standards. Claudia depicts how widely accepted the white beauty standard is when she says, “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the word had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. ‘Here,’ they said, ‘this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it” (Morrison 294). Here Claudia exposes not only the prevalence of the white beauty standard, but through the use of the word ‘worthy’ she also comments on how society equates “physical beauty with virtue” (Morrison 54).

Claudia is frightened by the doll and begins to hate it, saying, “I had only one desire: to dismember it” (Morrison 294). She destroys the white Baby Doll, rejecting the white beauty standard. Her hatred is later transferred to other lighter-skinned girls, such as Maureen Peal. However, it is socially unacceptable to hate these lighter-skinned girls and she is forced to make the transition “from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love.” (Morrison 328). Claudia says that much later she learns to worship Shirley Temple, which is another symbol for white beauty standards. With this transition completed and Claudia now worshiping symbols of the majority, she would devalue the opposite, which is anything associated with blackness, and in turn, herself. Thus, the adults in Claudia’s life have transmitted their own unresolved trauma to

her by indoctrinating her with white beauty standards through vehicles such as the Baby Doll and Shirley Temple.

Worldview

The presence of racial microstressors and intergenerational trauma collide in Dunbar's poem to produce a negative worldview. Blevins et al. explain that trauma exposure can alter one's perception of the world, affecting "an individual's sense of meaning and justice in the world" (11). It is clear from the depiction of a mask that the black American is forced to wear that Dunbar views the world as unjust. The worldview cultivated in *The Bluest Eye* is of a society that is hostile and violent. This is evident in the ending when the marigolds that Claudia and Frieda McTeer planted are discussed. The narrator says that "I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live" (Morrison 2664). Here the marigolds are meant to symbolize black children which are not nurtured, but instead critically damaged by a majority-white society. Thus, just as in Dunbar's *We Wear the Mask*, racial microstressors and intergenerational trauma lead the characters in *The Bluest Eye* to adopt a view of the world as hostile and even murderous.

The Symbol of the Mask

The initial depiction of Dunbar's mask is in the first line, "We wear the mask that grins and lies" (Dunbar 1). In this line the mask represents an unjust and apathetic society. This society refuses to acknowledge the pain that they themselves have imposed upon black Americans by their acts of prejudice and discrimination, and do not wish to see it written on the faces of their

victims. The symbol serves another purpose as well. The donning of this mask serves as another racial microstressor, furthering the cycle of cumulative trauma and societally-imposed repression that Dunbar presents in the poem. This forced repression also robs black Americans of the acknowledgement of their pain that would be integral to successful healing. That unresolved trauma is passed on through the process of intergenerational trauma, further supporting the malignant societal pattern that Dunbar draws attention to in this work.

The mask is explicitly mentioned two more times in the poem in lines 8-9, “Nay, let them only see us, while / We wear the mask” (Dunbar 8-9), and in the final two lines, “But let the world dream otherwise / We wear the mask” (Dunbar 14-15). These repetitions of the symbol of the mask, spread throughout the poem, serve to underscore the apathy of the majority society. White society, while the perpetrators of this social violence against black Americans, do not wish to be made to feel guilty for their actions and instead force their victims to maintain the mask in their presence. The mask then crystallizes into a symbol of both racial trauma and its societally-imposed repression. It conceals damage wrought by racial microstressors and forces black Americans to hide this damage, robbing them of the necessary conditions for successful healing and contributing to the intergenerational transmission of racial trauma. The mandate to conceal this trauma then acts as another racial microstressor, perpetuating the cycle that Dunbar illustrates in the poem.

The language used to describe the ugliness of the characters in *The Bluest Eye*, especially the Breedloves, is similar to that used by Dunbar to evoke his symbol of the mask. When the Breedloves are introduced, the narrator says that “Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and

Pecola Breedlove wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them” (522). This description clearly evokes the image of a mask.

The result of the mask, Pecola’s mask in particular, is more than the socially charged repression in *We Wear the Mask*. Pecola’s mask of ugliness leads others to say that they “cleaned ourselves on her” (Morrison 2652). The narrator goes on to say that “We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilty sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think he had a sense of humor” (Morrison 2652). Pecola’s mask leads her not only to repress the pain that it inflicts upon her, but to be a scapegoat for others and to feel as though she deserves it. Claudia supports this when she says, “And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt” (Morrison 2652).

Resilience

Despite the high degree of racial trauma represented in Dunbar’s poem, opportunities for resilience still exist. The primary avenue for resilience evidenced in the poem is the presence of a community or family for support. While Dunbar’s choice of plural pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘our’ acknowledges the systemic nature of his struggle, it also hints at the presence of a community that Dunbar could lean on for support. Lee et al. note that “Since racism is a socially constructed ideology and practice, the use of groups in constructing counter-racism narratives can be especially powerful for strengthening ethnic identity and curtailing the intergenerational transmission of internalized racism” (10). Therefore, whatever group Dunbar may have access to could be a protective factor for him against the racial microstressors and intergenerational trauma depicted in the poem. Dunbar could also reciprocally support the other members of this community that are subjected to the same stressors.

Opportunities for resilience also exist in *The Bluest Eye*. While parent-child relationships are strained in the narrative, Claudia and Frieda McTeer have a secure attachment in their sibling relationship. Foroughe and Muller mentions that “a secure sibling relationship may mitigate the negative impact of parental abuse, neglect, and conflict” (547).

Although there is a dearth of research addressing the protective factors of sibling relationships against racial trauma, it may be inferred that if sibling attachments mitigate damage from parental abuse and neglect that they may also be beneficial in the case of racial trauma. Foroughe and Muller also note that the sibling relationship can allow “children to disclose and address traumatic past experiences with the support of their sibling” (547). This more generalized conclusion further supports the inference that the secure sibling relationship between Claudia and Frieda McTeer would confer some protection against the damaging effects of racial microstressors and intergenerational trauma.

Concluding Remarks

Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem *We Wear the Mask* evokes the image of a mask to represent a cycle of racial microstressors, intergenerational trauma, and societally-imposed repression. This cycle can also be applied to Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*. In the novel racial microstressors take the form of either negative interpersonal interactions or media messages. An example of a negative interpersonal interaction in the novel is Pecola Breedlove’s interaction with Mr. Yacobowski at the store when she is attempting to purchase candy. An example of a media-related racial microstressor is when Pecola receives the candy and is presented with an image of a pretty white girl, substantiating her perception of herself as ugly.

Intergenerational trauma is found in the novel primarily through the passing of internalized white beauty standards from parent to child. This process is depicted by the gifting of a white Baby Doll, a symbol of white beauty standards, to Claudia McTeer. Another example of this process of intergenerational transmission of trauma is how after being indoctrinated with white beauty standards by the movies, Pauline Breedlove deems her child Pecola ugly as soon as she is born.

The symbol of the mask appears in the novel as well as the poem, however the implications are different. In the poem the mask symbolizes societally-imposed repression. However, in the novel the mask, Pecola's mask especially, represents not only societally-imposed repression, but also the role of a scapegoat and the feeling that she deserves the pain heaped onto her, both by the majority-white culture and by others in her own community.

Despite the exceptional level of racial trauma evident in the poem and novel, opportunities for resilience still exist. In the poem, Dunbar's use of plural pronouns reflects access to community, which could be a mitigating factor against racial trauma. In the novel, Claudia and Frieda McTeer's secure sibling relationship could also provide them with some protection against racial trauma. Despite an overwhelming prevalence of trauma in both works, connection and attachment provide hope for resilience.

Works Cited

- Blevins, Claire E., et al. "Do Negative Changes in Worldview Mediate Links Between Mass Trauma and Reckless Behavior? A Longitudinal Exploratory Study." *Community Mental Health Journal*, no. 52, 2016, pp. 10-17.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. "We Wear the Mask." *Literature: A Pocket Anthology* (6th Edition), edited by R. S. Gwynn, Penguin Academics Series, 2014, pp. 441-442.
- Foroughe, Mirisse F. and Robert T. Muller "Attachment-Based Intervention Strategies in Family Therapy with Survivors of Intra-Familial Trauma: A Case Study." *Journal of Family Violence*, no. 29, 2014, pp. 539-548.
- Lee, Bonnie, et al. "Breaking the silence of racism injuries: a community-driven study." *International Journal of Migration, Health, and Social Care*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-14.
- Miniotaite, Daina. "The Problem of Racialised Identity in Toni Morrison's Novel *The Bluest Eye*." *Language in Different Contexts*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2014, pp. 51-58.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Kindle ed., Vintage eBooks, 2007.
- Nadal, Kevin L., et al. "The Injurious Relationship Between Racial Microaggressions and Physical Health: Implications for Social Work." *Journal of Ethical & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, vol. 26, no. 1-2, pp. 6-17.
- Knight, Zelda Gillian. "In the shadow of Apartheid: intergenerational transmission of Black parental trauma as it emerges in the analytical space of inter-racial subjectives." *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome*, vol. 22, 2019, pp. 128-137.

Kogan, Steven M., et al. "Racial Microstressors, Racial Self-Concept, and Depressive Symptoms Among Male African Americans During the Transition to Adulthood." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, no. 44, 2015, pp. 898-909.