International Journal of Arts and Social Science www.ijassjournal.com
ISSN: 2581-7922,
Volume 9 Issue 3, March 2026

From Signs to Subjects: A Study of Things in *The Bluest Eye*

Ma Chaofan[1], Wang Wei[2]
[1,2](*School of English, Beijing International Studies University, China)*

ABSTRACT: *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye contains rich connotations of thing narrative, where "things" serve as key elements in plot and theme rather than passive objects. Current new materialist studies mainly emphasize the symbolism of things or analyze single types, failing to fully explore their shift from symbols to narrative agents or systematically explain the functional differences of various things and their links to racial trauma. From the perspective of new materialism, this paper examines how daily things acquire agency and evolve into narrative subjects. It finds that cultural things convey white aesthetic violence and distort Black self-awareness; man-made things witness family trauma and dysfunction; natural things provide temporary comfort yet turn into false redemption affected by white aesthetics and racial bias. This study clarifies the logic of thing narrative in the novel and offers a new material-based perspective for understanding marginalized groups' dilemmas.*

KEYWORDS: *The Bluest Eye, things, thing narrative, new materialism, subject*

I.INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) is one of the most influential and acclaimed African American women writers in the contemporary world. Against the dual influences of the Great Migration of African Americans in the early 20th century and the aggressive invasion of Black culture by the mainstream values propagated by Hollywood's film industry. Her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970, marking her emergence as a prominent African American writer. Set in Lorain, Ohio, between 1940 and 1941, *The Bluest Eye* tells the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, an 11-year-old African American girl who is obsessed with the white aesthetic standard, particularly the ideal of blue eyes. Pecola's story is narrated by Claudia MacTeer, the second daughter of the MacTeer family. As a young Black girl, Pecola is constantly neglected. Her mother shows no affection for her, her father is indifferent, she is bullied by her classmates, and scorned by neighbors. Only the MacTeer family takes her in and offers her care. In Pecola's mind, having a pair of blue eyes would free her from discrimination and grant her a happy family. However, reality proves to be the exact opposite. She is raped by her father, becomes pregnant, and later gives birth to a stillborn baby. Ultimately, she descends into madness, living in the delusion that she possesses the bluest eyes in the world as a tragic victim of racial self-hatred and aesthetic hegemony. Claudine Raynaud describes *The Bluest Eye* as an "anti-Bildungsroman," a novel of regressive growth, for it depicts the process by which a young Black protagonist gradually descends to schizophrenia[1]. The hostile social norms and aesthetic standards of that era trap Pecola in a quagmire of self-denial. Trapped in the shadow of racial discrimination, she internalizes external prejudices as self-loathing, spiraling step by step toward mental collapse. Her longing for blue eyes also stems from her desire for parental love: "look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes"[2]. She hopes that this transformation will change how others perceive her and win their kindness. Her obsession with blue eyes thus reflects both the racial prejudice she endures and the dysfunction of her family life.

Research on Toni Morrison and her groundbreaking debut novel *The Bluest Eye* originated in the 1980s and achieved remarkable development across multiple countries in the 1990s. Since she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, Morrison's works have continuously attracted widespread attention, among which

voluminous amounts of academic papers have focused on *The Bluest Eye*. Since its publication, scholars and critics at home and abroad have explored *The Bluest Eye* from various topics such as race, gender, class, and so forth, using different literary theories including feminism, trauma theory, cultural criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, spatial politics, narratology, post-colonialism, etc. In recent years, some scholars have examined the novel from the perspective of transmedia narration. Domestic and international scholars have primarily analyzed this work through traditional literary criticism approaches where researchers tend to center their attention on characters while frequently overlooking other integral elements of the literary text. "Things" in novels are usually neglected. In recent years, "thing narrative" has been quietly emerging and is increasingly flourishing in the field of narrative studies in China. The theoretical foundation of "thing narrative" lies in "thing theory" [3]. To understand the interpretive approach of "thing narrative" as a method of literary analysis, it is necessary to trace its origin back to "thing theory". Bill Brown is not only the first theorist to propose "thing theory", but also one of the most important scholars who integrated the theory of things with narrative studies. In addition to his seminal work *Thing Theory*, Brown has published a series of writings that present a multi-dimensional exploration of material things. In ordinary social contexts, the relationship between humans and things is a taken-for-granted subject-object dichotomy: humans are active, dynamic, and dominant, while things are passive, immutable, and subordinate. Within this framework, humans as subjects are the creators of history, and things as objects exist merely as passive, dominated entities. Brown, however, argues that:

"We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us...The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation [4]".

In a material society, since things function as important manifestations of social institutions, their effects exert influence on people through human mentality. A society imbued with the features of thingness always seeks to impose itself on people's various sensory perceptions as well as their spiritual imagination. In this way, things come to form a powerful influence over the subject. In other words, human subjects are inevitably shaped by the social attributes of objects. In *Tyranny of Things*, Brown also stated that "as accounts of commodity fetishism describe an aesthetic fascination with objects—the projection of an aesthetic value considered to be the property of a thing—they depart from Marx's theory"[5]. Brown deemed that Marx's rational exposition of the nature of commodities and Twain's romantic depiction of object fetishism share a striking affinity—both enable us to perceive the essence of how the subject and the object interact with each other in the capitalist world of "things", and how this interaction ultimately subjects human to the tyranny of things (i.e., commodities. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's obsession with the standard of "white beauty" was so intense that she insisted on drinking milk from a blue-and-white cup emblazoned with Shirley Temple's likeness, while also craving the "Mary Jane" brand candies—whose packaging featured a white woman with fair skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair.) as the object. In other words, in a sense, it is precisely aesthetic consciousness that triggers consumer desire, which in turn gives rise to such phenomena of "the tyranny of things" as object fetishism and human subjugation to material objects.

In modern society, the inherent materiality of things has been increasingly eroded. In the social milieu we inhabit, things have demonstrated greater agency in social dynamics, and this agency has evolved into a force that reconstructs society. In such a society, the traditional human-thing relationship has been replaced by a new paradigm characterized by the reification of humans and the humanization of things; at this point, the things we hold in our hands "must be equal, comrades" [6].

In recent years, however, with the rise of thing theory and new materialism, a growing number of scholars have begun to pay more heed to things in *The Bluest Eye*. Tian Taiyu conducted research on the plants in the novel within the framework of new materialism, and found plants in this novel exhibit "three types of capacities: narrativity, agency, and meaning-making"[7]. Zhou Quan and Liu Qiping focused on interpreting "the interaction between material things and traumatized human beings" to address the anthropocentric issues central to *The Bluest Eye* and the blindness made by corresponding anthropocentric critical approaches [8]. Nevertheless, the role of things in this novel extends far beyond mere interaction with humans or serving as human "companions." Their

value is far more diverse, and their significance possesses broader implications. From the perspective of new materialism, this paper explores how "things" evolve from symbols into narrative agents with agency.

II. The Violence of Things: The Aesthetic Hegemony of Cultural Things

The In the world constructed by *The Bluest Eye*, the most shocking form of violence is not always physical brutality, but the deeply ingrained white aesthetic hegemony embodied in ubiquitous cultural symbols. As Coole and Frost argued in *New Materialisms*: *Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, "it is now timely to reopen the issue of matter and once again to give material factors their due in shaping society and circumscribing human prospects" [9]. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is replete with descriptions of everyday objects. In the novel, these "things" are not ordinary commodities; instead, they are highly symbolized, serving as perfect carriers of white supremacist ideology. Far from existing passively, they actively and continuously inculcate a fatal sense of self-negation in Black subjects, especially Black women.

As a thing permeating every aspect of Black life in the novel, "blue eyes" are undoubtedly the core and most potent symbol of violence. They are not a neutral description of physical features, but rather meticulously constructed by American society and culture through media advertisements, children's toys, school education, and daily evaluations, as the absolute standard of beauty, purity, value, and even humanity itself. "our appreciation of beauty is, unlike pleasure, disinterested an idea that could seem 'satisfactory only to the least aesthetic minds'" [10]. In the novel, Claudia's internal monologue attests to the universal acceptance of this aesthetic standard across racial lines: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" [11]. Claudia's act of destroying the doll thus carries a rebellious significance. Her attempt to dismantle the white doll is an instinctive, childlike rebellion against this symbolic violence. Claudia cannot comprehend why adults regard the "blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned" doll as "beautiful." She tries to take the doll apart to discover what makes it so lovely and appealing, only to find sawdust, metal pieces, and a sound-making mechanism inside. This scene is highly critical: as a children's toy, the white doll functions as an important tool of aesthetic education. During the most impressionable period of childhood, it directly links white physical features to aesthetic values such as "cuteness" and "deserving of love." Claudia's act of disassembly challenges this indoctrination, revealing the emptiness behind the so-called standard of beauty. As a cultural thing, the doll acts as a medium through which white aesthetic hegemony is transmitted to the next generation—and Black parents, complicit in this process, use this same aesthetic standard to discipline their own children. When they see Claudia tearing the doll apart, the adults reprimand her for not cherishing her belongings: "I-never-had-a-baby-doll-in-my-whole-life-and-used-to-cry-my-eyes-out-for-them. Now-you-got-one-a-beautiful-one-and-you-tear-it-up-what's-the-matter-with-you?" [12]. The author used hyphens on purpose to make an emphases and through these sentences, the adults' voices are filled with the longing of years of unfulfilled desire, implying that they project their childhood regrets onto their children, attempting to compensate for their past deprivations by giving the doll to Claudia—yet in doing so, they repeat the cycle of ignoring a child's true needs. Claudia's internal monologue also reflects this aesthetic discipline: "But I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas" [13]. After destroying the blue-eyed, white-skinned doll, Claudia finds herself tempted by the thought of redirecting her urge to dismember onto white girls—perhaps out of jealousy, for "The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them" [14]. The fact that even Black women unreservedly embrace this aesthetic standard further underscores the absurdity and violence of this symbolic objectification and indoctrination, making Claudia's rebellion all the more poignant.

Similarly, the cup printed with Shirley Temple's image and the Mary Jane candy wrappers constantly discipline Pecola, inculcating the belief that "blue eyes" are the only legitimate aesthetic standard. Shirley Temple was a famous American child star with golden hair and deep blue eyes. Influenced by Frieda's admiration for Shirley Temple, Pecola gradually becomes obsessed with the blue-and-white cup decorated with Shirley Temple's portrait, which she uses to drink milk. When her mother complains repeatedly about Pecola drinking three quarts of milk, Claudia's internal monologue reveals the truth to the reader that they knew Pecola loved that cup with

Shirley Temple's face on it. Pecola would take "every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" [15]. Here, Morrison demonstrates her mastery as a literary artist: beyond using the white milk in the blue-and-white cup adorned with the white child star as a metaphor for white aesthetics, she also narrates Pecola's experience of buying Mary Jane candies. After sensing the emptiness edged with contempt in the white man's blue eyes, a void created by her black skin, Pecola feels deep sorrow. She channels her anger into imagining a small dog, and before the muddy water of its eyes could seep into hers and before tears could fall, it is the Mary Jane candies that dispel her low spirits. Each candy wrapper bears the image of Mary Jane, a white American film star who, unsurprisingly, has golden hair, white skin, and blue eyes. Pecola is captivated by Mary Jane's portrait on the wrapper; once again, those blue eyes enchant her, sweeping away her earlier unhappiness, because "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" [16]. Pecola's obsession with Mary Jane candies is thus another manifestation of her worship and internalization of white aesthetics. "It is aesthetic consciousness that triggers consumer desire, which in turn leads to phenomena such as fetishism and 'the tyranny of things' where humans are enslaved by objects" [17]. Beneath the "sweetness" of Mary Jane candies lies the bitter core of racial inequality. As material objects, they not only carry specific cultural messages but also materialize aesthetic hegemony through Pecola's repeated acts of purchasing and consuming them. Every interaction with these candies constitutes an act of aesthetic bullying against her.

III. The Narration of Things: Man-made Things as Witnesses to Familial Dysfunction

The concept of "storied matter" was proposed by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. Inspired by the ideas of new materialist thinkers such as Karen Barad and Jane Bennett, the two scholars, in elaborating their theory of material ecocriticism, emphasize the discursive power inherent in matter [18]. Unlike traditional views that regard things as passive entities serving human needs, the things in the novel possess narrative functions. Like storytellers, they convey information to readers through their state of being, traces of change, and interactions with human actions, acting as silent yet powerful narrators. Among these objects, the coal stove plays a narrative role that transcends symbolism and embodies the ontological status of things. As a highly symbolic central object, the coal stove is a quintessential example of "storied matter." In Pecola's home, "The only living thing in the Breedloves' house was the coal stove, which lived independently of everything and everyone, its fire being 'out,' 'banked,' or 'up' at its own discretion" [19]. Morrison's attribution of anthropomorphic "living" and "it's own direction" to the coal stove is no mere rhetorical device; it is a profound revelation of the agency of things from the perspective of new materialism. The state of the coal stove mirrors the emotional state of the family; its independent existence and self-sufficiency silently and coldly witness the emotional alienation, lack of responsibility, and breakdown of mutual dependence among family members. On a physical level, the coal stove is the sole source of warmth in Pecola's home. Yet every morning, "it always saw fit to die" [20]. Morning, which should mark the beginning of a new day—a time for families to rekindle hope and share warmth—instead becomes the moment when the coal stove "chooses" to go out. The detail that Pecola opened her eyes and lay staring at the dead stove foreshadows the imminent quarrel between the Breedlove couple. The changing state of the coal stove silently proclaims that in this space called "home," not even the most basic physical warmth can be guaranteed, let alone emotional comfort. Its extinction symbolizes not only the absence of physical heat but also the complete freezing of familial affection. Through its material state changes, the coal stove delivers a silent indictment of Cholly's utter failure as a father and husband. As "storied matter," the coal stove transcends symbolic representation, directly participating in the narrative construction of familial relationships through its material "living" state. It is no longer a passive backdrop, but an active narrator.

IV. The Healing of Things? The False Redemption of Natural Things

In *The Bluest Eye*, as cultural things inflict aesthetic violence and man-made things bear witness to traumatic memories, natural things, with their unique existence, seem to offer spiritual solace and healing power to those trapped in adversity, serving as a glimmer of light in the darkness. However, Morrison's writing is marked by complexity and clarity: she profoundly reveals that even the comfort provided by natural things is often tinged with the undertones of racism and class division. The black cat with blue eyes appears in the novel as a narrator, one that "is no longer a silenced other to be gazed upon, but is liberated from its original instrumental nature,

endowed with discursive capacity like humans" [21]. Though unable to speak, the black cat with blue eyes, through its interactions with Geraldine, reveals itself to be a thing that sustains Geraldine's illusory respectability and emotional projection—and an ironically charged agent that inadvertently triggers deeper trauma in Pecola's tragedy. By merging two elements, blue eyes, a symbol of white aesthetics, and black fur, a marker of Black identity. Within this natural object, Morrison mirrors the longing shared by both Geraldine and Pecola for a Black subject who embodies the white ideal of blue eyes. For Geraldine, a middle-class Black woman, this rare black cat with blue eyes is far more than a pet. She lavishes on the cat the affection she cannot or will not offer in her familial relationships: extreme devotion, meticulous care, to the point of arousing the jealousy of her son Junior. "The cat will always know that he is first in her affections. Even after she bears a child" [22]. The cat's existence compensates for the emotional coldness and lack of connection between Geraldine and her husband and son, providing her with emotional solace. By owning and cherishing a cat "will love her order, precision, and constancy," "as clean and quiet as she is" [23], Geraldine reinforces her self-image as a tasteful, caring middle-class Black woman—one who is distinct from the dirty lower classes. When Pecola is tricked into the house by Junior and locked inside, it is the cat that dispels her fear. "Pecola rubbed the cat's head; he whined, his tongue flicking with pleasure. The blue eyes in the black face held her." [24]. In this moment, as a natural living being, the cat, with its soft fur and gentle movements, truly provides fleeting, tactile comfort: a pure interspecies connection free from the cruelty of the human world. Yet it is not so much the cat that comforts Pecola as it is the fact that the cat serves as an aesthetic embodiment of blue eyes paired with black skin that brings her joy. This fleeting moment of beauty is shattered by Geraldine's intra-racial prejudice. Upon seeing the dying cat and the ragged Pecola, Geraldine sneers: " 'Get out...You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house' " [25]. Geraldine, herself Black, drives Pecola away with vicious words, snuffing out the last flicker of beauty the cat had brought her. At that moment, the dying cat "shuddered and flicked his tail" [26], as a silent narrator bearing witness to the malice of intra-racial discrimination. The healing power of natural things is real, yet ephemeral. Pecola's encounter with the black cat with blue eyes ultimately fails to become a path to redemption; instead, it evolves into a tragedy that deepens both racial discrimination and intra-racial division.

V. CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the three dimensions of "things" in *The Bluest Eye*, cultural things that embody aesthetic hegemony and inflict aesthetic violence, man-made things that bear witness to familial dysfunction, and natural things that offer comfort yet represent false redemption, this paper reveals how Toni Morrison endows "things" with profound subjectivity and narrative agency that transcend their symbolic meanings. From the perspective of new materialism, the things in the novel are by no means silent foils or passive props that merely carry meaning. They are active agents deeply embedded in and actively participating in the narrative process intertwined with racism, class oppression, and discrimination, collectively shaping the tragic fates of the novel's characters. From sign to subject, the narrative power of things in *The Bluest Eye* is demonstrated as never before. This not only deepens our understanding of this literary classic but also provides an insightful materialist perspective for interpreting the living conditions of marginalized groups. However, this research has its limitation. Existing literature reviews on this topic are excessive yet inadequate in comprehensiveness. To address this gap, supplementing the research by interpreting other literary works of Toni Morrison from the perspective of the New Materialism will contribute to a more holistic and systematic understanding of the narrative value of "things" in African American literature.

REFERENCES

[1] C. Raynaud, *The cambridge companion to the African American novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 114.

[2] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 34.

[3] Y. Ning, Bill Brown's "thing theory" and its significance for narrative studies, *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, *41(4)*, 2020, 132.

[4] B. Brown, Thing theory, *Critical Inquiry*, *28(1)*, 2001, 4.

[5] B. Brown, The tyranny of things (trivia in Karl Marx and Mark Twain), *Critical Inquiry*, *28(2)*, 2002, 454.

[6] B. Brown, Thing theory, *Critical Inquiry*, *28(1)*, 2001, 10.

[7] T. Tian, *The study of plants in The bluest eye from the perspective of new materialism*, master's thesis, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, 2024, 55.

[8] Q. Zhou, Q. Liu, Agentic things and traumatized people in Toni Morrison's *The bluest eye*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, *45(3)*, 2022, 118.

[9] D. Coole, S. Frost, New materialisms: ontology, agency, and politics (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 3.

[10] B. Brown, The tyranny of things (trivia in Karl Marx and Mark Twain), Critical Inquiry, 28(2), 2002, 447.

[11] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 14.
[12] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 14.
[13] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 14.
[14] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 15.
[15] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 16.
[16] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 38.
[17] Y. Ning, Bill Brown's "thing theory" and its significance for narrative studies, *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, *41(4)*, 2020, 135.
[18] S. Iovino, S. Oppermann, Introduction: storied come to matter, in S. Iovino, S. Oppermann (Eds.), *Material ecocriticism,* 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014) 1-17.
[19] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 27.
[20] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 27.
[21] Z. Yang, The animal turn in contemporary western literary criticism, *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, *46(1)*, 2025, 159.
[22] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 67.
[23] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 67.
[24] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 70.
[25] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 72.
[26] T. Morrison, *The bluest eye* (London: Vintage, 1999) 72.