Tony Morrison’s, The Bluest Eyes, is a tragic containing a theme of desire for beauty to become more lovable. Pecola, the main character, is the largest victim of the theme. Pecola has a difficult life, her mother and father show her no love or affection and the kids at school are mean to her. No one pays Pecola any attention except her two friends Claudia and Frieda. Pecola does not have a good relationship with her family, she and her mother are so disconnected Pecola does not call her mom, she calls her Mrs. Breedlove. Mrs. Breedlove puts no effort towards her home or family, all of her cares are focused on her job which is a maid at a white persons home where she also cares of the daughter, a pretty, blonde, white girl. Also her mother and father are constantly fighting, whether they are yelling at each other or physically beating on each other. All the negativity and lack of love in Pecola’s life intensifies her desires for beauty. The most heartbreaking event in this story is when Cholly, Pecola’s father, rapes her while she is washing dishes one day. At this point in her life Pecola does not know what to do with herself so she goes to visit Soaphead Church, she has his business card that claims he work magic to fix people’s problems. She goes to him asking for blue eyes, he is conflicted with this because it is something he cannot do. However, he continues on with his act and tells her to feed the dog and if it acts weird she will get her blue eye (he puts poison in
the dog’s food so obviously it acts up.) Due to the events that occur in Pecola’s life, especially the more recent act of her father, she reaches her breaking point and hits complete insanity. She has a new friend, who is imaginary, who constantly tells her how beautiful and blue her eyes are. Pecola’s issue with her identity can be better understood when you look at this novel through a psychoanalytic lens. Applying Jacque Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” to Pecola’s life strengthens the theme of desire for beauty and how all the events in her life lead up to her mental breakdown.

Lacan’s “mirror stage” is one of his earlier elements in his essential reinterpretation of some of Freud’s work. Lacan proposes that infants go through a stage in life where an external image of the body produces a psychic response creating a mental illustration of an “I”. This image is created is given either by a literal reflection in a mirror or given to the infant through the mother (or primary caregiver.) His idea explains that the infant will identify with the image which supplies as a “gestalt” of the infant’s emerging view of selfhood. However because of the underdeveloped infant’s physical vulnerability the image of self does not correspond with, meaning the “imago” is recognized as an “ideal-I” toward which the subject will strive for throughout his/her life. Lacan states that the “mirror stage” designs the ego as essentially dependent upon the external objects. As the infant, or referred to as individual when he or she grows, begins to mature it enters into social relations through language. This “other” of language will become more complex throughout the individual’s life through social and linguistic frameworks giving the individual its specific characteristics. “It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [savoir] Into being mediated by the other's desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people,
and turns the I into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process” (Lacan 1127.) The process of structure of self as a social identity starts at the mirror stage and brings to completion only with the resolution of the Oedipal Crisis. Essentially by following Freud’s stages of oral, anal, and genital Lacan’s “mirror stage” follows the stages of real, imaginary, and symbolic. At infancy the infant only has a sense of self and is a state of need, this is the stage of real. As the infant develops it reaches the imaginary stage where gaining access to language begins to create identification and the “ideal I”. These stages both lead to the symbolic stage where the individual has matured enough to understand language and that language creates the desire to become the “ideal I”. The image has to come before the individual is established, you have to see yourself before you can identify yourself. It is Lacan’s belief that the crucial at which the child gives up the mother as love object and attaches to father marks his exit from “the imaginary” and entrance into “the symbolic”. Unfortunately for Pecola she never emerges from the imaginary stage to the symbolic stage.

Pecola has a difficult time moving from the pre-Oedipal due to lack of voice and nourishment in her life as a child. Elizabeth Abel emphasized this by saying “the story that Morrison tells provides a version of psychoanalytic narrative that represents the mother as the irreducible matrix of the child’s development, the unachievable object of a desire that cannot know but must forever seek its origin” (Abel 208.) The fact that Pecola calls her mother Mrs. Breedlove and not mother highlights the permanent absence of “m(other)” in Pecola’s psychic life. It is obvious Mrs. Breedlove does not have a good relationship with her daughter, especially the scene when Frieda and Claudia to Mrs. Breedlove’s work to visit Pecola and they spill the
pie in front of the little girl that Mrs. Breedlove tends to. When the pie is spilt she snaps at Pecola but then calms down the “little pink and yellow girl” soothing her and telling her “hush, don’t worry none” (Morrison 108-9.) Mrs. Breedlove never had much of an attachment to Pecola, even from birth Mrs. Breedlove referred to her as ugly. This affects Pecola immensely in her real stage. As an infant the child is in need of love and affection to create a sense of self, from the beginning Mrs. Breedlove creates a negative sense of self for Pecola.

Because of the lack of love from her mother Pecola tries to fill the void by identifying with the image of the Other. The fact that Morrison does not portray Mrs. Breedlove as a loving maternal figure in Pecola’s life, it is anticipated that Pecola will turn her desire for love and satisfaction to the identificatory other. Her pitiful desire for love is resolved in her significant image of the Imaginary identification Shirley Temple, the racial other. Shirley Temple is the epitome of beauty and everyone loves her, because of this Pecola believes in order to be loved she needs to look like Shirley Temple. “She desires some milk in blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. Pecola was a long time with the milk and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” (19.) Lacan claims that desires we have come from the desire of the Other. Because of this Pecola shifts her desire for the mother not to the image of her breast (milk) but to the image of Shirley Temple. Unfortunately replacing the desire for love from the image of her mother to the image of Shirley Temple is ultimately inadequate for Pecola because she wants to truly be loved. Where there is a lack there is a desire. So because Pecola’s desire for love is never satisfied her desire strongly becomes to be loved by others.
Morrison emphasizes Pecola’s lack of love and desires early on in the novel. “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” (32) This question occurs to Pecola after she looks at herself in the mirror. Pecola related a person’s lovability to their beauty “It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.” (46) Pecola believes with blue eyes her family will be better and love her more, if she looked different they would act different. “Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We must not do bad things in front of those pretty eyes. Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes.” (47) However, the narrator claims “she would see only that there was to see, the eyes of other people,” desire is never for just one thing, there is always desire for more or for something else. Pecola has a problem differentiating herself from the other because she is so caught up in an identificatory web of imaginary. To apply the mirror stage to Pecola’s desire for blue eyes is to say that she is always looking in the mirror, and that mirror is upheld by white society standards, therefore Pecola is ugly for not having pale skin and blue eyes. Accordingly Pecola’s evolution from imaginary to symbolic causes her mental, psychological, and physical devastation.

The image of what is beautiful is socially constructed. “Adults, old girls, shops, magazines…all the world has agreed that a blue eyed, yello-haird, pink-skinned doll was that every girl treasured.” (20) This socially accepted image is was builds up Pecola’s desire to be what she is not. The difference between Self and the Other is socially constructed, not just psychologically composed. Unlike Pecola, Claudia is very aware of the identity of her Self and the Other. She takes pride in her self-image and is comfortable in her own skin. However she is
the exact opposite of Pecola. Pecola desires to be the beautiful image represented by society, whereas Claudie despises it and tears apart her white, blonde, blue eyed baby doll in spite of the image. Claudia learns to accept that the image of a pale skinned, blue eyed girl is worshiped, but because she can differentiate from the other she is able evolve toward the symbolic realm. Pecola is not as fortunate.

In order to be pushed into the symbolic realm Pecola would need to be pushed through the Oedpal stage. Unfortunately, like Mrs. Breedlove, Cholly is absent from Pecola’s life. Cholly fails to take up the symbolic function because he is deprived of phallic power by the white culture, he is psychologically castrated. Because Cholly could not fulfill the symbolic function in Pecola’s post-mirror subjectivity Morrison introduces Soaphead Church to fill the role of the symbolic father. Pecola turns to Soaphead for help after the rape done by her own father. She has his card that claims he is a psychic reader; however in this instance he plays a much more powerful role. Even though he appears to be this powerful, symbolic figure he is deprived of the phallic in his powerlessness to give Pecola what she asked for. “For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles. Never before had he really wanted the true and holy power.”

With his anger caused by his lack of power as a psychic he chooses to play the role of God, the ultimate father. By creating this role he makes Pecola believe and believes himself that he gave her what she wanted “I gave her those blue eyes she wanted... I did what you did not, couldn’t, would not do: I look at the ugly little black girl, and I loved her, I played you.”

Because of this illusion he demonstrated Soaphead registers her in the imaginary rather than the symbolic.
As Soaphead Church’s subject Pecola remains in the imaginary, constantly checking her reflection and asking her “friend” for reassurance that she has the “bluest” eyes. Because her psychic is unable to evolve from the imaginary to symbolic all Pecola can do is take the imaginary for the real. She has a complete schizophrenic breakdown, Claudia describers her as “a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach.” (204) Her mental breakdown exemplifies how she tries to be a normal women in society but it expresses the dominating authority of the ruling Other (white culture). Through the Other’s neglect Pecola is forced into isolation and abandonment of self-worth.

The ideas expressed in Lacan’s mirror stage are expressed throughout Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola endures many events in her life which lead up to her delusional state of mind. She constantly battles with the desire to be loved and the desire comes from the lack of love from her family and schoolmates in her life. Lacan’s stages of the real, imaginary, and symbolic are expressed throughout Pecola’s life, however due to the absence of her mother and father Pecola is unable to be pushed through the oedipal stage to get out of the imaginary and into the symbolic. The community also plays a huge role pushing Pecola to her mental breakdown. Because of the lack of love, or even attention given by the community Pecola’s desire to be beautiful and love are intensified and continue to grow. Not only did Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” help me understand Morrions *The Bluest Eye*, but vice versa.
