

Selves and Counter-Selves in Lorraine Vivian Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract:

This paper is an in-depth analysis of the social condition of the Blacks in America and their direct confrontation with prejudices, stereotypes, and racial mythologies that allowed the whites to ignore the worse social conditions created by them for the Blacks until the last decades of the 19th century. It examines “selves and counter-selves,” or double consciousness, in Lorraine. Vivian Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. By using cultural studies as the theoretical framework in the explication of these artistic works, this paper explores the ways in which recent American literature re-imagines the human self as porous and energetic and capable of deep inter-ontological communion with other open selves across space. Cultural studies, which first emerged as part of a tradition of British cultural analysis best exemplified by the work of Raymond Williams, generally investigate how cultural practices relate to wider systems of power associated with or operating through social phenomena, such as ideology, class structures, national formations, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and generation. The paper concludes that every “coloured man” in the United States has a sort of dual personality. This gives the African American a certain insight into what Du Bois termed “the gift of second sight.”

Keywords: Selves and Counter-Selves, double consciousness, cultural studies, black American, and Negro

Introduction:

Identity and "selves and counter-selves" have been major themes in American literature since its inception. Conventionally, Americans view themselves as idealists who are striving to create a decent society that is progressive and always changing. America started to forge its own cultural identity during the Revolutionary era, and the novelty of this new culture prompted many people to ponder the meaning of American identity and

what it meant to be an American. The majority of the literature created during the Revolutionary War was political in nature, but there was also a significant amount of writing on the process of self-discovery, the formation of a new nation, and the definition of a new culture.

The United States has surpassed Britain and Germany in industrial production to become the world's most powerful industrialized nation by the second decade of the 20th century. But a lot of

people had to deal with hardships following the 1929 Wall Street Crash. Following the Wall Street Crash, African Americans—many of whom had moved north during the first two decades of the twentieth century—were among those most severely impacted by the economic downturn. Before then, around the start of the century, a lot of Americans considered race to be their biggest issue.

Richard Gray aligned to this when he asserted that “certainly, this was true of those African American writers who initiated debate about the “Color line” as W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) termed it” (159).

Booker T. Washington consistently argued that “In all things that are purely social, blacks and whites could be separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (159) He saw the agitations of questions of social equality or “selves and counter-selves” as “the extremist folly”. The core text for explaining Washington’s ideology is in *up from Slavery* (1903). It was a slave narrative of a kind, at the beginning. But it more clearly resembles the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin, as it describes the rise of its hero from humble beginning to fame and fortune.

For Du Bois, racial Prejudice was a national issue and an intensely urgent one. As he puts it, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of race”. (160). His most influential work was the one in which he launched his attack on Booker T. Washington, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Du Bois's groundbreaking description of "selves and counter-selves" or the "double-consciousness" of "the Negro" is at the core of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois remembers that when he was younger, a "shadow" unexpectedly covered him. He realized he was "shut out from their world by a vast veil," distinct from other people. He says he was and still is like every other member of his race in this regard. In this American society, where people are not given "no true self-consciousness" but are instead only able to perceive themselves "through the revelation of the other world," he and they have been "born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight." Du Bois confides, “this sense of

always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” The history of the American Negro is the history of their conflict, or "selves and counter-selves." The African American is always aware of his "two-ness"—that is, of being both an American and a Negro—two souls, two ideas, two unreconciled strivings, two clashing ideals in one dark body. It brings him to the paradox of having two different goals as an American and an African. The African American yearns for the blending of his two selves into a more authentic and better version of themselves, ensuring that none of the former identities are lost in the process.

The idea of African Americans' "double-consciousness" or their dual selves was immediately reflected in James Weldon Johnson's first novel. According to the protagonist of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), "every colored man" in the US possesses a dual personality that is proportionate to his intelligence. He is compelled to perceive the world from the perspective of a colored man rather than that of a citizen or a man.

God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermon in Verse (1927), a collection of poems by African American poet Robert Johnson that attempted to capture the fervor and intensity of black sermons through polyrhythmic cadences, colorful language, and an intensification by repetition technique, was the most potent poetic realization of this quest for identity. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, on the other hand, was his most significant book and the most potent prose realization. Initially published under pseudonym, it was later republished in 1927, during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, under Johnson's actual name, and it served as a model for other novelists, including Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. According to Winston Napier in his *Introduction to African American literary Theory*:

The Harlem Renaissance generated a literary and cultural explosion that would establish the black writers as a seminal social force. Accordingly, the role of writers and the value of their work to the

improvement of African American identity became a popular concern (2).

Writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and George S. Schuyler produced essays that addressed issues of ideal literary themes such as "selves and counter-selves," cultural identity, and psychological reconstruction. Their critical writings provided the black community with lessons in identity and intellectual responsibility.

Theoretical Framework:

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses a wide range of critical initiatives both in Britain and America. Its antecedents can be traced to work published in the 19g0s and early 19h0s by British leftist critics like Richard Hoggart in his *The Uses of Literacy* and Raymond Williams *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* which in turn derived from F.R. Leavis and scrutiny group, although Hoggart Williams were critical of what they considered Leavis's middle-class biases.

This research work is properly situated within the context of cultural studies. This is because according to Okachukwu Onuah Wosu, "literature, because of its social commitment function, is expected to mirror local, national and global experiences in order to inform, expose, or educate/enlighten readers on contemporary issues" (31) The literary theory of cultural studies therefore examines how meaning is created in social structures with adherence to class, ethnicity, gender, race, ideology, and nationality. Cultural studies is important because it helps people understand where, why, and how certain attitudes and beliefs about themselves and other groups have been constructed. This knowledge can help change societal relationships and power structures for the better.

Selves and Counter-Selves in Lorraine Vivian Hansberry's *A Raisin in The Sun*:

Lorraine Hausberry as a child lived in a black neighbourhood of Chicago's South side with her well-educated, successful black parent who publicly fought discrimination against black

people. During this era, segregation- the enforced separation of whites and blacks was still legal and widespread throughout the South. Northern states, including Hansberry's own Illinois, had no official policy of segregation, but they were generally self-segregated along racial and economic lines. Chicago was a striking example of a city carved into strictly divided black and white neighbourhoods. Hansberry's family became one of the first to move into a white neighbourhood, but Hansberry still attended a segregated public school for blacks. When neighbours struck at them with threats of violence and legal actions, the Hansberry's defended themselves.

Much is expected of the black man in America- perhaps, too much. Even in a world that claims to be free of prejudice and hate, citizens of colour must lead their lives with a certain type of awareness- remaining keenly conscious of their identity in a way white citizens are not. In his *Text of Our Spiritual Strivings*, civil rights activist. W.E.B. Du Bois describes the black psyche using a two sided "double consciousness" under this governance, the black individual must reconcile with the standard burdens of the social ladders, while also living under a veil of white contempt. According to him "Measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused pity... [containing] two thoughts... two warring ideas in one dark body" (46).

"Selves and counter-selves"- this duality morphs Selves and counter-selves- this duality morphs into what Du Bois later defines as true self-consciousness. Even if all African Americans traverse this conflict of ideals, it can be difficult to inhabit from a white, unconscious stance outside the veil.

Walter Lee Younger, a black man in Lorraine Hansberry's plays *A Raisin in the Sun*, can be used to discuss "selves and counter-selves" or Du Bois' double, and true self-consciousness. In order to appropriately characterize Walter Lee in service of Du Bois' ideology, the scope of preceding terminology must be more deeply defined. More specifically, what is the black man's quest? The

easy answer to this question is freedom or liberation.

Du Bois is determined to make the white race intimate with the black struggle, describing its depth and origin in his own life at an early age, "the worlds I longed for.... Were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, i would rest from them. Just how I would do it i could never decide" (4) With this anecdote in mind, we can define the position of the black man a forced juxtaposition, a cruel comparison, or an unending quest for self-respect.

Just as Du Bois was compelled to gaze wistfully upon the "prizes" of another, Walter Lee remains on the sidelines of success as a chauffeur to a rich white man. Dissatisfied with his reality, he hopes for something greater than unfulfilling servitude, "I drive a man around in his Limousine and I say, 'Yes Sir; no, sir' very good, sir'... Mama, that aren't no kind of job" (61) Walter Lee wants to set a better example for his family to have a career that gives him independence and control, but finds himself hopelessly trapped. Not until his mother puts this sorrow in perspective can we understand Walter's error. By harkening back to the more oppressive period her generation overcame, Mama surfaces an important distinction "once upon a time freedom used to be life-now its money.... [you're] talking 'bout things we aren't never even though hardly" (61-62)

From Mama's point of view, it's clear that Walter Lee's interest and perspective has been skewed by an exposure to white opulence which counters his real self.

It is important to note that Walter's penchant for affluence stems from more than just his career. Perhaps the greatest contingency in the life of the Younger family has to do with a certain \$10,000 insurance cheque received as compensation for the death of Walter Lee's father. Determining how this money will be spent has the potential to affect the entire family. In his naiveté, Walter Lee believes he must invest the money and take a risk, emulating the conduct of white men. This hunger for white knowledge and behaviour which is counter to his

self is something Du Bois understands. Even with the right to vote, the black community continues to feel the shadow of white contempt and see within themselves a "compulsory ignorance" – a sharp desire "to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man" (8).

As his wife Ruth comments "Walter Lee says colored people ain't never going to start getting ahead till they start gambling on some different kinds of things in the world investments and things" (25) For Walter, the anxiety to reach a white level of success often supersedes good judgement.

Throughout the play Walter Lee's mother rejects his thirst for investment and growth, choosing instead to spend the money on a new home in the predominantly white neighbourhood of Clybourne Park. Frustrated that he cannot invest the money, Walter begins to feel that his mother has "butchered up" his dreams and that he has no control over his family's destiny.

However, Mama decides to give Walter the remainder of money so that he can "be the head of the family" like he is supposed to be (94). Yet in spite of everything his mother warned him, Walter Lee decides to invest the entirety, placing his sister Beneatha's education in Jeopardy. Crisis occurs when the money is lost after his business partner Willie takes it and runs. It is at this point when Walter Lee must again reconcile with a future removed from the prospect of wealth, allowing him to reconsider the effects of money on his psyche, and gesture towards a more honest self-consciousness.

While the black man remains wholly conscious of his freedom and culture, the white man does not. Nor does he see the benefits of racial coexistence. Just prior to the loss of the insurance money, the younger family is visited by a timid white man named Mr. Lindner, who represents the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. His goal is to politely discourage the family from moving, by offering to buy their new home at a profit. According to Mr. Lindner:

Our people out there feel that [we] get along better... when they share a common background. I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it... [we believe] that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities (104)

It takes the courage of Walter to rebuff Lindner's threat to re-purchase the house for double the amount. Even when African American citizens are given rights to live a "white" life on paper, they must still grapple with the stigma and oppression, forced to live within two identities: selves and counter-selves.

Selves and Counter-Selves Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*:

In *Prejudice and Your Child*, psychologist Kenneth Clark reveals that "racial awareness is present in Negro children as young as three years old" (19) He further reveals:

As children develop an awareness of racial differences and of their racial identity, they also develop an awareness and acceptance of the prevailing social attitudes and values attached to race and skin color... the child knows that he must be identified with something that is being rejected – and something that he himself rejects. This pattern introduces, early in the formation of the personality of these children, a fundamental conflict about themselves (46).

The African American children of the *Bluest Eye*, Frieda and Claudia MacTeer, and poor, pitiful Pecola Breedlove are victims of "selves and counter-selves," or double consciousness, when they discover that the colour of their skin excludes them from the soft eye of favour that falls upon little girls who belong to the white world. The outcome of this discovery is the division of their minds through the realization that they are both girls and black little girls. It is through this action that Morrison reveals the dark side of the effects of double consciousness on a child, because the

consequences led to Pecola's loss of identity and sanity.

Claudia and Frieda are introduced at nine and ten years old (15), and Pecola is eleven (35). It is hard to say exactly what age the girls are before becoming aware of their skin colour, but it isn't difficult to see that the effects of double consciousness are already unfolding upon them. Claudia wishes to destroy white baby dolls (20), Pecola Cherishes a Shirley Temple cup from which she took every opportunity to drink milk out of just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (23), and Frieda is willing to give up ice cream to avoid a possible altercation with a little mulatto girl who has informed them that she is cute (76), while they are ugly (73). Claudia even asks the question of little white girls, "What made people look at them and say, Awwww', but not for me?" (22).

One of the most poignant revelations we receive about the extent of the "twoness" existing in these children is the jealousy Claudia experiences while watching Bojangles dance on screen with Shirley Temple. It emerges from her declaration that "he is enjoying, sharing, and giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels" (19). For Claudia, whose socks apparently did slide down beneath her heels, even articles of clothing are capable of showing preference to white girls.

The sense of double consciousness is further revealed by the thoughts and feelings of the MacTeer girls toward the little white girl who lives next door to them:

Rosemary Villanucci... sits in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. She rolls down the window to tell my sister Frieda and me that we can't come in. we stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth... (9).

First, consider the name Morrison has attributed to this troublesome little white girl: "Rosemary," which sounds like an aptly prim and proper name

from the white world, and "Villanucci," which sounds and even looks like "Villian you see." This establishes Rosemary and the white world in which she lives and represents herself as the villain, which naturally stages the opposite of their counterpart black world, along with the girls who are trapped in it as the victims. Rosemary is fortunate enough to ride in a nice car while Claudia and Frieda are walking, and she is quick to inform them that they "can't come in" to that bread-and-butter world of hers.

The MacTeer girl's response to Rosemary is striking but not surprising. It is quite relative, as they wish to "oke the arrogance" from her eyes and destroy that "pride of ownership" she is lucky enough to experience. They also make plans to beat her up when she emerges from the car and "make red marks on her white skin".

The MacTeer girl's response to Rosemary is striking, but not surprising. It is quite reactive, as they wish to "poke the arrogance" from her eyes and destroy that "pride of ownership" she is lucky enough to experience. They also make plans to "beat her up when she emerges from the car and "make red marks on her white skin.".

The reactive nature existing within the MacTeer girls makes them representative of the statement of Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* when he defines the African American as consisting of "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (2).

Unlike the MacTeer girls, Pecola's pattern of self-protection is not reactive projection; it is passive acceptance. Pecola is an 11-year-old girl who lives in the town of Lorain, Ohio. There, she is constantly surrounded by the popular images of white mass culture. This immensely influences her sense of self. Pecola's biggest wish is to have blue eyes. As Claudia explains it, blue eyes were a sign of beauty, and they were promoted by the blue-eyed dolls that every girl wanted. Being exposed from an early age to this image of beauty, Pecola could not help but want to look like that herself.

This takes a devastating toll on her psyche. Her double consciousness is expressed by her inability to see herself as someone else. She only manages to love herself when she identifies herself with the images of white culture:

Each pale-yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (43)

Only when she can identify herself as Mary Jane can she love herself as a person and be happy with her self-image. However, most of the time, she cannot even do that. In hard times when her parents fight, she tries to disappear:

She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now ... The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally, it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (39)

The constant motif in the novel is the eyes. In her mind, Pecola's brown eyes are the only thing she cannot erase and the only thing she badly wants to change. It is no surprise that, in the end, they are the ones who secure her tragic end. In her community, Pecola is regularly cast away. People around her either ignore her or abuse her. In school, she is constantly ignored by the teachers, who assume she has nothing clever to say. When she goes to the candy store, the Polish salesman first ignores her and, after a while, unwillingly sells her

the candy. The boys tease her "about matters over which [she] had no control... that they themselves were black or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant." (55) It is their own self-hatred that motivates them to abuse Pecola. They need someone to release their anger. Similarly, Geraldine sees Pecola as the unwanted part of herself and insults her as the "nasty little black bitch" (75).

Using Neumann's theory, Awkward explains this double consciousness: "[t]he self is split... into the good, desirable, unshadowed ideal self and the evil, undesirable, shadowed black self" (191). That means that the part of a person that accepts white standards is the good one, and the part that represents black characteristics is the evil one. For the other members of the community in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola represents this evil part. They need her to feel better about themselves. Unlike *Beloved*, where Sethe is shunned from her community because of something she did, Pecola is left out because of her inherited traits. Being ignored and abused, she assumes the role of the "other" inside the community of an already marginalized group of people. Even the title of the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, wherein eye can be understood as I, implies Pecola's loneliness. In other words, she does not belong to her own community, where she should be accepted and loved.

Pecola's biggest problem is her internalized hatred for herself. Her inability to reconcile with herself as she is leads her to insanity. In a state of madness, she finally manages to get the one thing she wants: blue eyes. The fact that she receives a double voice at the end of the novel through her imaginary friend only ensures her state of permanent double consciousness. At this point, it is too late for Pecola to merge her consciousness into one identity true to her heritage. As an already cast-away member of her community, Pecola's insanity only seals her fate as a scapegoat. "According to Neumann, scapegoating results from the necessity for the self and/or the community to rid itself of the 'guilt-feeling' inherent in any individual or group failure to attain the 'acknowledged values' of that group"

(Awkward 190). In this context, scapegoating is a necessary action for the community to cleanse itself. The community does not try to deal with this feeling of failure and shame, caused by the pressures of white society, because it is easier for them to cast it away onto Pecola. Pecola, who learned from her parents to accept her ugliness silently, adopts the role of scapegoat: "All of our waste, which we dumped on her and which she absorbed, and all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us" (159). Nobody protests about what has been done to Pecola. Only Claudia realizes much later that it was wrong what they had done, but as she says, "it's much, much, much too late" (160)

Conclusion:

Most of the literature of African American writers describes the erstwhile slaves and their culture with regard to who they were and what the white people did to them. African American literature initially focused on the issue of slavery as presented by the popular subgenre of slave narrative. The history of African American people is the story of their journey through oppression, slavery, and liberation.

Therefore, the notion of "double consciousness" or "selves and counter selves" in 20th-century American literature is an attack or protest of black American experience in an unjust society like America. From the analysis of our texts, it can be deduced that every colored man in the United States has a sort of dual personality. He is forced to take his outlook on things not from the viewpoint of a citizen or a man but from the point of view of a colored man. This gives the African American a certain insight into what Du Bois termed "the gift of second sight."

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