The Bluest Eye Study Guide

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

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Contents

Introduction

As Toni Morrison has become one of America's most celebrated contemporary authors, her first novel *The Bluest Eye,* published in 1970, has gained increasing attention from literary critics. Most of the novel is narrated by a young black girl, Claudia MacTeer, who is part of a poor but loving black family in Lorain, Ohio, in the 1940s. However, the primary focus of the novel is on Pecola Breedlove, another young black girl who lives in very different circumstances from Claudia and her sister Frieda. Pecola's mother, Pauline, is cruel to her family because they are a constant reminder that her life can never measure up to the ideal world of the white family for which she works as a maid. Not only is her mother distant and aloof, but Pecola's father is also unreliable for any comfort or support. Cholly Breedlove drinks excessively and later rapes Pecola. She bears his child, who dies shortly after birth. Because Pecola, like Pauline, yearns to be seen as beautiful, she longs for the blue eyes of the most admired child in the 1940s: Shirley Temple. After visiting Soaphead Church, a "spiritualist" who claims he can make Pecola's eyes blue, Pecola believes that she has the bluest eyes in the world and now everyone will love her. Clearly, Pecola is the truest kind of victim. Unlike Claudia, who possesses the love of her family, Pecola is powerless to reject the unachievable values esteemed by those around her and finally descends into insanity. *The Bluest Eye* portrays the tragedy which results when African Americans have no resources with which to fight the standards presented to them by the white culture that scorns them.

Author Biography

From her childhood days in Lorain, Ohio, Toni Morrison learned from her parents, Ramah Willis Wofford and George Wofford, the importance of racial pride but also the tragedy that can result when a black person internalizes alien, often white, values. These lessons surface repeatedly in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* and in many of her other works.

Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, to parents who were very confident in themselves and their race. They stressed the importance of an education, which is reflected in the fact that Morrison was the only child entering her first grade class who could read, Her love of books continued as she devoured the works of European writers, including Jane Austen, Gustav Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy, as an adolescent.

After graduating from high school in Lorain with honors, Morrison earned a B.A. in English from Howard University. Two pivotal events for Morrison occurred at Howard: she changed her name to Toni because many people could not pronounce Chloe, and she became acquainted with black life in the South while touring with the Howard University Players, In 1955, Morrison earned an M.A. in English from Cornell and taught English at Texas Southern University for two years before returning to Howard in 1957 to teach English. Again, events at Howard were pivotal as she met her husband, Howard Morrison, a Jamaican architect, there. Morrison rarely discusses her marriage, which ended in divorce after the births of two sons, Harold Ford and Slade Kevin.

Raising two sons alone, Morrison moved to Syracuse to take an editing job with a textbook subsidiary of Random House, and to combat isolation, she wrote. She first worked on a story she had begun in her writers group at Howard. This story about a little black girl who longs for blue eyes was the genesis of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* published in 1970.

Since the appearance of *The Bluest Eye,* Morrison's successes have multiplied. In 1970, she took an editorial position with Random House in New York and began writing regularly for the *New York Times* about black life. Her second novel, *Sula,* was published in 1973 and brought Morrison national acclaim. In 1977, her third novel, *Song of Solomon* was chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection, the first book by a black writer to be chosen since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940. The novel also won the National Book Critics' Circle Award, and Morrison was awarded an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award, as well as an appointment by President Carter to the National Council on the Arts, Morrison appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* at the publication of her fourth novel, *Tar Baby.* in 1981. She has received the most praise for her fifth novel, *Beloved,* which earned her a Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. Morrison's next novel, *Jazz,* was published in 1992. She has also written one play entitled *Dreaming Emmett,* which was performed in 1986; edited two books, *The Black Book* in 1974 and *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays all, Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* in 1992; published a book of

literary criticism entitled *Playing* in. *the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in 1992; and published one short story, "Recitatif," in *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women.*

While continuing to write, Morrison has taught at such universities as State University of New York at Albany, Princeton, and Yale. Most notable of the awards she continues to garner is the Nobel Prize for Literature, which she won in 1993, making her the first African American to receive this honor.

Plot Summary

Part I

The Bluest Eye opens with a short Dick and Jane primary reader story that is repeated three times. The first time the story is written clearly. In the second telling, however, the text loses its capitalization and punctuation. By the third time through, the story has also lost its spacing. The novel then shifts to a short, italicized preface in the voice of Claudia MacTeer as an adult. She looks back on the fall of 1941. We find that this book will be the story of Claudia, her sister Frieda, and their involvement with a young black girl named Pecola, pregnant with her father's child.

Part II: Autumn

In this section, the tense shifts from present to past, indicating shifts between the nine-year-old Claudia and the adult Claudia acting as narrators. The story begins with the arrival of Mr. Henry Washington, a boarder who will live with the MacTeers. At the same time, Pecola Breedlove comes to live with the MacTeers. She has been "put outdoors" by her father, who has gone to jail and not paid the rent on their apartment. Frieda and Pecola talk about how much they each love Shirley Temple. Claudia rebels. She does not like Shirley Temple nor the white dolls she receives each Christmas with the big blue eyes. To the dismay of the adults, she dismembers these dolls, trying "to see what it was that all the world said was lovable."

The text shifts to the third person ("he"/"she") omniscient point of view and gives the reader a brief of the inside of the Breedloves' two-room apartment. The whole family shares one bedroom and there is no bath, only a toilet. At the same time, the Breedlove family is introduced. The family is described as ugly' "No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family... wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak although it did not belong to them."

Pecola's parents both fight and make love in front of their two children. In the midst of the turmoil, Pecola comes to believe that if she had blue eyes, she would only see the things she wanted to see. Pecola's only refuge from her life is with the three prostitutes who live upstairs and who treat her with affection, the only people who do so.

Part III: Winter

Claudia and Frieda endure the gray Ohio winter until a "disrupter of seasons," a new girl named Maureen Peale, comes to school. She is lighter skinned than either Claudia, Frieda, or Pecola, and her family is wealthy Claudia and Frieda both hate her and love her. One day on the way home from school, the three girls encounter Pecola, who is

being teased by a group of boys. Frieda rescues her, and Maureen appears to befriend her. However, Maureen soon turns on Pecola, taunting her with her blackness and her ugliness.

The focus of the book shifts to a description of the "Mobile girls," women who attempt to control and modify their blackness. In imitation of the dominant culture, they straighten their hair, control their body odors, and learn to behave in order to "do the white man's work with refinement".

Geraldine is one such woman who has moved to Lorain with her husband and son, for whom she cares, but never nurtures. Her love is spent on a cat. One day, her son Junior lures Pecola into the house and then throws the cat at her. He finally kills the cat and blames Pecola as Geraldine walks into the house. Geraldine berates Pecola: "'Get out,' she said, her voice quiet. 'You nasty little black bitch.' "

Part IV: Spring

In the spring, Mr. Washington, the boarder, fondles Frieda's breasts, and Mr. MacTeer beats him up and throws him out of the house Later, Frieda and Claudia go to visit Pecola who is at the Fishers', where Mrs. Breedlove works as a housekeeper. While the children are there, Pecola spills a pan of hot blueberry cobbler all over herself, the dress of the little Fisher girl, and the clean white floor Mrs. Breedlove viciously abuses Pecola for the mess and comforts the little white girl

In the next section, a third person omniscient narrator flashes back to Pauline's young adulthood and subsequent marriage. This narration also details how Pauline came to work as a servant for a white, rich family. Pauline loves the order, the plenty, and the cleanliness of the house Interspersed in the third person narration are sections of Pauline's voice in first person. She talks of her life with Cholly and why she stays with him in spite of his drunkenness and abuse.

The narration shifts again, this time to Cholly' s story. We read how he was abandoned by his mentally ill mother when he was four days old. His Aunt Jimmy raised him until she died when Cholly was a young teen. After the funeral, he took a young girl into the woods and had his first sexual experience. He and the girl are discovered by a group of white men who force him to repeat the act for their entertainment. Cholly never forgets nor forgives this humiliation. At the end of this chapter, Cholly returns to his home in Lorain, drunk, and finds Pecola washing dishes. He is overcome with both love and hatred for her; his response is to rape her. He leaves her passed out on the floor, under a quilt. Pecola awakens to her mother's angry eyes.

Again, the scene shifts, this time to the room of Soaphead Church, an educated West Indian man living in Lorain. Pecola, now pregnant with her father's child, visits Church, a "reader, advisor, and interpreter of dreams" in order to request blue eyes. He tricks her into feeding poisoned meat to his landlady's dog; Pecola reads the dog's death throes as a sign from God that her wish has been granted.

Part V: Summer

It is summer when Claudia and Frieda hear that Pecola is pregnant with her father's child. They overhear adults talking about the child and how it will probably not survive. Claudia and Frieda seem to be the only ones who want the baby to live They make a promise to God to be good for a whole month and plant marigold seeds that will serve as a sign for them: when the seeds sprout, they will know that everything will be all right. However, as readers we already know that "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" and nothing turns out right for Pecola. The next chapter is a deranged dialogue carried out between Pecola and herself in which she discusses her new blue eyes, questioning if they are the "bluest eyes" in the world. We also discover that Cholly has raped his daughter more than once. Her madness, then, appears to be a defense against the pain of living her life.

The last voice in the novel is Claudia's, now an adult looking back, trying to assign blame for the tragedy of Pecola. She tells us that Pecola's baby died soon after birth; Cholly is dead as well; that Mrs. Breedlove still works for white folks, and that Pecola spends her days talking to herself and picking at the garbage in a dump. The novel closes with an indictment of the community and the culture:

And now when I see her searching the garbage-for what? The thing we assassinated? I talk about how I did *not* plant the seeds too deeply, how It was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town 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 fruits It will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter It's too late At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late.

Autumn

Autumn Summary

It is the fall of 1941 and sisters Claudia and Frieda get new brown stockings and cod liver oil to start school with. There is some talk among the grown ups about what's going on at Zick's Coal Company and they pick up coal pieces at night along the railroad tracks. Their house is old and drafty; lit only by one kerosene lamp. The two girls seem to be objects in the house rather than human beings. When the cold weather comes and Claudia gets a cold, her mother chastises her for being inconsiderate. Nonetheless, Claudia's mother covers her in Vicks and flannel and puts her to bed under a pile of quilts to sweat it out. When Claudia thinks back on that autumn, all she remembers is that somebody didn't want her to die.

Mr. Henry comes to stay with them that August. Mr. Henry is the new boarder who had been staying with Miss Della Jones until the woman went addled, so Mr. Henry's arrival is quite an event. He smells of lemons and Sen-Sen and does magic tricks. Most importantly, Mr. Henry speaks directly to the girls; he does not ignore them like most adults do.

Pecola also comes to stay with them. The county has placed Pecola in their home because her father burned the family's house down and the authorities need a safe place to put her until things get straightened out. The girls hear the adults say that Pecola's family is really outdoors now. Claudia knows all too well that outdoors is different from being out. If you are put out, you just go somewhere else, but if you're outdoors, there is nowhere else for you to go. Outdoors was the very last resort and you did not want to go there.

It was the fear of being outdoors that drove black people to property ownership. All the time they were renting, they talked about the day when they would have their own homes. Pecola, having come from a renting family, arrived at their house with nothing. Pecola did not even have a change of clothes, so the two sisters tried very hard to keep her from feeling "outdoors".

Frieda and Pecola struck up an instant friendship because they both thought Shirley Temple was so cute. Claudia didn't share their enthusiasm. She thought that she didn't like Shirley Temple for the same reason that she hated dolls. Every Christmas, she would get some hard headed, blue eyed baby doll with clothes that scratched you when you tried to hold her. Claudia didn't think that dolls were entertaining; she preferred to dismember the dolls and explore their insides. The way she treated her dolls didn't discourage the adults; every year they brought her another one.

Claudia wished that the adults would ask her what she really wanted. She wouldn't have said she wanted a doll. She would have told them that she wanted nothing more than to sit on her little stool in Big Mama's kitchen with lilacs on her lap and listen to Big Papa

play the violin. Sitting in the kitchen would satisfy most of her senses and she would eat a peach at the end just to make sure that all her senses were attended to.

She transfers her hatred of the dolls to the little white girls who think that they are so cute. Claudia resents the fact that white girls think they are cute but that Claudia isn't cute.

A few days after Pecola arrives, the girls are sitting on the back porch trying to avoid their mother's ranting. Suddenly, Pecola half screams and she stands up while blood gushes between her legs and stains the back of her dress. Frieda was the voice of reason and she figures out what is happening right away. Frieda sends Claudia inside for water to wash off the steps. The girls then take Pecola back behind the shed and Frieda tends to her with the materials that her mother had given her pending her own first menstruation. Everything would have been under control if their despicable neighbor, a girl named Rosemary, hadn't yelled out that they were playing naughty. Rosemary's yell brings their mother outside and she starts swatting at them with a switch. The girl's mother realizes the nature of the situation and she takes Pecola inside with her for some female attention. That night, the girls lay in bed in awe of the mysteries Pecola is now a part of.

Autumn Analysis

The story is told from the perspective of Claudia who spends most of her time with her older sister Frieda. They come from a poor black family but they are not as poor as some other families. The girls, at least, have the love of their parents which is not universal as evidenced by the arrival of Pecola who stays with them when her own family disintegrates. Already at their young ages, they are tired of the distinctions made between themselves and the little white girls their own ages. Claudia wonders, "Why don't people think they are pretty?" and "Why are all baby dolls white?" The only outlet she has for her frustration is dismembering the white baby dolls she gets as gifts. She thinks that if she takes them apart piece by piece she understand what makes them so desirable. Pecola's presence in their lives foreshadows some of the life lessons the girls will soon face as she literally makes the transition from child to woman in their presence.

Here Is The House...

HereIsTheHouse... Summary

Pecola's family had lived in an apartment inside an abandoned building in Lorain, Ohio. It had housed many things before them; a pizza parlor, a bakery, and a gypsy store. But some realtor had installed temporary walls inside the building and it became their home. There were two rooms, a living room and a bedroom. The kitchen was a separate room at the back of the building. There was no bathroom in their apartment, there was just a toilet. The bedroom had three beds; Sammy's, Pecola's and Mr. and Mrs. Breedlove's. Their furnishings were old at best as they had all been tossed away by someone else at some other time. Pecola had no fond memories of the place. There was no life left in anything in the apartment except for the old coal stove which stood in the middle of the apartment.

HereIsTheHouse... Analysis

It's no surprise that Pecola comes to need the help of strangers. She has no home to speak of and no feelings of what a real family life should be. The place her family inhabited was an empty shell with a few things set down in the middle of it. The furniture was torn and the beds were angled against the wall. There were no soft edges or comforts anywhere. The author creates a very dismal picture of their existence.

Here Is The Family...

HereIsTheFamily... Summary

Living in the storefront apartment is not just a temporary condition for the Breedloves. They live there because they are poor and black. The family stays in the storefront apartment because they think they are ugly. The family looks ugly to others but no one can figure out exactly why they look ugly. The reason that they look ugly is that they believe they are ugly. No one has ever contradicted their belief and they have developed a hatred for each other and for the world.

Pecola hears her mother as she wakes up and goes into the kitchen. Pecola's mother begins making breakfast. Pecola steels herself in her bed because she knows that the violence will start soon. Her father had come home too drunk for his mother to argue with so their argument would take place this morning. Her parents fought each other because they couldn't fight anything else. Sometimes Pecola's brother, Sammy, would run away for weeks but Pecola was too young to run away so she just tried to stay invisible.

This morning, the fight is about coal. Her father refuses to get more coal for the stove so a fight starts. Her parents hit each until her father hits his hand on the iron bed railing when her mother ducks out of his way. Pecola wonders if they would stop fighting if she was pretty and had blue eyes. If she looked different, she thinks, maybe they would look at her instead of focusing on the hate they have for each other. Every night Pecola prays for blue eyes. She is very patient about her prayers because she understands that a change of such magnitude would take some time.

All Pecola can ever see about herself is the way she looks to others. The horrible Mr. Yacobowski who owns the grocery down the street does not think much of her. When she comes into his store, a bell signals her presence but he doesn't look up because he is looking at her finger pointing to the Mary Jane candies she has selected. Her stomach feels sick until she is out of the store with her nine candies named for the blue-eyed girl whose picture graces the wrapper. She thinks that if she eats these candies she might become Mary Jane.

Upstairs from above the Breedloves' apartment live three whores; China, Poland and Miss Marie. Pecola loves to visit them and run errands for them. She likes talking to them because they didn't despise her. She listens to their stories and asks naïve questions about their lives. Pecola innocently wonders why they had so many boyfriends. The prostitutes try to help her understand the distinction between love and work but she can't grasp. Pecola feels almost like they were her sisters and she enjoyed their time together.

HereIsTheFamily... Analysis

Pecola's dismal family life takes shape in this chapter and it's violent to say the least. Her parents abuse each other because they hate everything else but they can't vent their anger anywhere else. Their two children deal with the situation by running away, hiding, or trying to disappear entirely. Pecola has the most unattainable coping strategy of all: she prays for blue eyes. She thinks that if she were prettier and had blue eyes her life would change. She thinks her parents would stop fighting and that people wouldn't look at her with such distain. She would be valuable and acceptable if only she had those blue eyes. It seems that the upstairs whores are becoming role models and this probably foreshadows that she will mimic their lives in some way and repeat the same unhappy pattern that their lives have taken.

Winter

Winter Summary

Claudia describes her father's face in winter, "his eyes a cliff of snow threatening to avalanche and his jaw like the edges of a snowbound field dotted with stubble." The family seems to be frozen in place in by his lessons on how to tend the fire in every possible situation. The family is just trying to make it to spring.

The cold monotony of winter is broken with the appearance of Maureen Peal. She is a pretty, high-yellow girl new to their school. Her clothes are exquisite and she is obviously as rich as some of the white girls. The whole school is smitten by her. The teachers adore her and the boys don't even consider throwing rocks at her. Claudia and Frieda have not developed an opinion of her yet but they have taken to calling her Meringue Pie behind her back just to level the playing field a little bit. The girls are secretly pleased to learn that she has a dog tooth and that she was born with six fingers on each hand and still bears the little nubs where the two fingers were removed.

Claudia gets to know the new girl a little better when she is assigned to the locker next to Claudia's locker. This is how Maureen ends up walking home with Frieda and Claudia one afternoon. On this afternoon the girls see the boys circling and taunting Pecola. Frieda flies into action and comes to Pecola's defense. The boys disappeared altogether when they saw that Maureen is with them. Maureen introduces herself to Pecola and she puts her arm in hers. Pecola and Maureen walk off like they are long lost friends.

As they approached Isaley's ice cream store, Maureen suggests that they should get ice cream since she had money. It never occurred to Claudia and Frieda that Maureen meant that they were all to buy their own ice cream. Claudia and Frieda didn't have any money at all. All the sisters could do was watch Pecola and Maureen with envy until they had finished their orange pineapple and black raspberry swirls.

The conversation then moves to the topics of boys, making babies, and whether any of them had ever seen a naked man. The girls came to Pecola's defense because Maureen jumps when Pecola says she had never seen her father naked. This seems to interest Maureen who taunts the defenseless Pecola. Claudia swings her fist, misses Maureen and hits Pecola by mistake. Maureen runs across the street yelling back at the three girls that she was cute and that they were nothing but black.

Claudia could see that the insults had hurt poor little Pecola and she wishes she could insert a long stick along her spine to help her stand up straight. The girls part and the sisters walked in to a quiet house. Suddenly Mr. Harry jumps out from the stairs fastening his bathrobe and gives them money for ice cream. This is an ironic twist but the girls decided that Isaley's is too far away to go back too. The girls also don't want to

risk running into Meringue Pie again so they settle on potato chips and candy from Miss Bertha's store.

Since the girls didn't go all the way to the ice cream store, they return sooner than Mr. Henry expected. When they look in the window the girls see Mr. Henry with two women. One was the woman named China and the other one was Maginot Line. Mr. Henry was licking China's fingers and they were all giggling and carrying on.

After the two women left, the girls went into their house and asked who the girls were even though they already knew. Mr. Henry laughs a little bit and tells them that the women were from his Bible study group. The girls know that their mother would kick Mr. Henry out if she knew what had happened so they agree to each other that they won't tell her.

Winter Analysis

There's never a good season to be poor but winter is the cruelest. Even the black families who usually get by are in trouble when the temperatures drop and the world is frozen. It seems as if the world is taunting the girls with the appearance of Maureen Peal with her cotton candy sweaters and patent leather shoes. As if it isn't bad enough that the white girls are better off than they are now they have to deal with a rich black girl too. Maureen shows her true colors in when she first befriends Pecola and then attacks her. Claudia and Frieda determine that being rich doesn't mean that a person is nice. They conclude that there is something worthwhile about being good.

The girls have an eye-opening experience with Mr. Henry and his guests. They have been very sheltered and it seems inevitable that they will tell their mother about what they have seen how long it will take them depends on how well Mr. Henry behaves and how well he treats them in the interim.

SeeThe Cat...

SeeTheCat... Summary

According to Claudia, there is certain kind of girl who comes from towns with names that sound like love. Towns with names like Mobile, Newport News, Marietta and Nagadoches seem to bred tall, thin, brown girls who soak up their hometown air and carry it with them into the world. These girls come from the kind of neighborhoods where everyone has a job and people sit on front porch swings. The girls from these towns always seem to be clean and cool and their clothes are always pressed to a shine. The girls go to local colleges, find husbands, create crisp orderly households, and produce one child, who is usually called Junior. Geraldine one of these lucky girls. She has moved to Lorain with her husband Louis and their son, Junior. They have a cat that Geraldine dotes on more than her family, but that doesn't seem to be unusual.

Louis is jealous of the cat and he tortures it in retribution for his mother's lost attention. When the cat isn't available, Louis picks on other kids. On one particular day, his victim is Pecola who is cutting through the school yard which borders his house. He lures her inside with the promise that she can their new kitten. Once inside she sees that it is a glorious house and she is in awe of the colors reaching out to her from the fine furnishings and appointments.

While she is distracted by the furnishings, Louis throws the cat at her and both she and the feline are scared out of their wits. He pushed her into a small room with the cat and closes the door, refusing to let her out. When it gets quiet he peeked in and when he sees that she is petting the cat it is more than he can stand. He throws open the door, grabs the cat by its two back legs and swings it around in circles over his head.

Pecola is terrified now and she tries to stop Junior. He releases the cat which flies into the window and slides down with a thud. Just at that moment, Geraldine comes into the room and Junior blames the incident on Pecola. Geraldine screams words at her that she has never been called by a colored woman. Pecola leaves the house and walks into the wind and the snow that is starting to fall.

SeeTheCat... Analysis

The author paints a very vivid picture of the girls who come from the Southern towns with the lyrical names. She sets them apart as colored girls as opposed to the black girls like Pecola. These colored girls are quiet and clean. The black girls are noisy and dirty. But somehow the reader gets the sense that the distinction is so fragile that they can't entertain the idea of one of the black girls in their world or they might be considered the same thing which is a risk that they simply can not take. Their lives in the northern states are quite different from what they would experience in the lyrical

southern towns. So they create a façade and they can't tolerate one inch of variation because their structure is always in jeopardy of crashing.

Spring

Spring Summary

The twigs are different in the spring which means that the girls' beatings are different in the spring. The twigs are beautifully disguised in forsythia and lilacs but their sting lasts longer than the switches of winter. Even years later, Claudia can't think of spring without feeling the sting of those fresh branches.

One Saturday when Claudia had been particularly lucky and had just enjoyed the fresh grass, she finds Frieda crying in her room. Claudia asks if Frieda had been whipped and her sister told her that she hadn't. After some coaxing Frieda tells her that their father had beaten Mr. Henry because he had touched her breasts. It had been a big scene. Their father threatened to shoot Mr. Henry and all the neighbors came to watch the commotion.

Frieda tells her that it wasn't a whipping that is making her cry, she's crying because her reputation is ruined just like Maginot Line, the whore who had kept company with Mr. Henry last winter. Frieda thinks that she is going to get fat and ugly just like that whore and that even exercise and diet won't help her. Claudia reminds her that China and Poland are also whores and that they are skinny because they drink so much whiskey.

The girls decide that they need to get Frieda started on some whiskey right away. Since there has never been any liquor in their house, the girls go to Pecola's house because they know that her daddy drinks all the time. When they arrive Maginot Line is sitting on the balcony upstairs. Maginot Line is friendly to the girls and she tells them that Pecola has gone over to where her mama works, to get the laundry. Maginot Line tells them that they're welcome to wait with her but Frieda tells her that they're not allowed to. Maginot Line takes offense to her statement and throws an empty root beer bottle at them.

The girls decide to find Pecola right away so they walk to the lovely white house where her mama works. The white house is right on Lake Erie and even the sky seems bluer in this neighborhood.. Pecola is waiting on the back porch of the house when the girls find her. Pecola's mother tells the three of them to wait just inside the kitchen while she goes to the basement to get the wet laundry. The girls are enveloped in a cocoon of cleaning products and blueberry cobbler smells as they stand in awe at this spotless white kitchen.

Pecola touches the pan with the fresh cobbler in it, to see if it's hot, just as a little girl all pink comes into the kitchen and asks where Polly (Pecola's mother) is. Pecola fingers the cobbler and suddenly the girl shouts for Polly and the cobbler goes crashing to the floor, splashing the blue gooey filling everywhere.

Pecola's mother is furious when she sees the mess and she orders the three girls out immediately. Polly tends to the little girl telling her that she would bake another cobbler. The little girl wants to know who those three girls are but Pecola's mother tells her not to worry about it.

Spring Analysis

It was almost inevitable that the lecherous Mr. Henry approached one of the girls inappropriately. Now that it has happened and he has been banished from the house, it is Frieda who feels the shame. Her shame and confusion over what has happened leads the girls to another environment where they are unwelcome. When the blueberry cobbler crashes to the floor, the sisters become guilty by association when Pecola's mother reprimands them. They don't have a voice anywhere they go, even in their own home.

See Mother...

SeeMother... Summary

Pecola's mother, Polly, didn't have a chance at a decent life. Polly who was in Alabama was the ninth of eleven children and she had stepped on a rusty nail when she was two years old. The wound left her with a crooked, archless foot that flopped when she walked. Other than Polly's deformity, there was nothing special about her.

Because she couldn't play like the other children, Polly found other ways to amuse herself and she took great pleasure in organizing things. Whether it was canned goods on a shelf or peach pits on the step, Polly loved putting things in order. .

As a child Polly had helped take care of the house until the family moved to Kentucky in search of a better life. Polly cooked and cleaned the house while her folks worked and she watched her younger twin brothers when they came home from school. She had only gone to school for four years so she was free to tend the house all day. But she dreamt of marrying a man who wouldn't notice her deformity.

And then one day, she met such a man. Cholly Breedlove was kind to her and careful of her foot. Cholly even took special care that she didn't get tired when they went out walking. Before she met him, there wasn't much laughter in Polly's world.

They married and moved up north because the steel mills were hiring. For awhile, their life together was very good but then everything seemed to change. She was used to taking care of a house and a yard, not a small apartment. It was hard for her to make friends because she wasn't used to so many white people and even the colored people didn't treat her very nicely. The few black women friends she did have teased her about her southern accent.

Polly decided to take a job working for a white woman in her home and Cholly began drinking more and hitting her. Things got really bad between them when he showed up at the white woman's house one day demanding money from Polly. The woman of the house was outraged and she told Polly not to come back until she had left Cholly for good. The woman still owed Polly $11 but even when Polly swore that she was leaving Cholly, the woman wouldn't give her the money until she had done it for good. Polly had no choice but to quit her job.

And then Polly had her two children. Polly loved her children but life was hard. It wasn't the children's fault that she was tired all the time or that there was never enough money. Motherhood was not the joy Polly always thought it would be. When the two kids were older, Polly got the job working for the Fisher family near the lake where the sky was always bluer.

Polly enjoyed her work in the Fisher household because there were stacks of fresh clean towels ready when she gave the little girl her bath every day, and there were

embroidered linens and fresh hot water that came right into their home from shiny faucets. In the Fisher home Polly could arrange things and clean things and there was always beauty and calm. Polly was her glory in the Fisher home but she kept it to herself. Polly didn't let anything from her home life seep into the Fisher home.

Polly lives for her work. She had tried to leave Cholly once but she hadn't been able to bring herself to do. Polly has been reduced to enduring the relationship they have and for the sake of what they once had.

SeeMother... Analysis

As if being born a poor black child in the early 20th century south weren't hardship enough, Polly suffers an injury that disables her for life. Polly doesn't use her disadvantage for any special privileges. Instead, Polly, did what she could by keeping the house and cooking meals, even when very young. Polly found solace by arranging things. As a child she dreamt of the day that someone would come and bring her to a place of quiet and peace but when Cholly does take her away their peace is short lived. So Polly falls back on what she knows which is arranging things and bringing order out to chaos. Polly thinks that she will enjoy being a mother but life turns out to be too hard. What she does love is working more in the white woman's house where the house stays clean and the she can line up long rows of cans of food.

See Father...

SeeFather... Summary

Cholly Breedlove was abandoned when he was only four days old. His great Aunt Jimmy saw his mother place a bundle on a heap near the railroad and rescued him. His mother left and was never seen again so Cholly was raised by the old woman. His great Aunt named him for her dead brother, Charles, and she told Cholly that his real father's name was Samson Fuller. Samson Fuller had run away to Macon a long time ago. As Cholly grew up he knew that he was lucky to have been saved but there were times when he wished that the old woman wasn't his whole world.

When Cholly was old enough, he got a job at Tyson's Feed and Grain Store and he was befriended by the drayman there, an old man named Blue Jack. Blue told him stories and taught him about things he needed to know from a man's perspective.

Cholly's life went on that way until Aunt Jimmy died. His Aunt had gone to a church meeting in the woods one day and she had sat on a damp bench during the service. Five days later she took to her bed. Her friends came to see her and brought liniments and potions but she didn't recover.

Her friends then decided to send for M'Dear, a midwife and diagnostician. The midwife looked Aunt Jimmy over; she touched her forehead, scratched her scalp, listened to her heart and gut, and decided that Aunt Jimmy had a cold in her womb. She was to drink nothing but pot liquor until she was well. The women brought bowls of pot liquor from black-eyed peas, collards, turnips and beets, and green beans. A couple of days later Aunt Jimmy felt stronger. Then one night, Essie Foster brought over a peach cobbler. Aunt Jimmy felt strong enough to eat a piece and the next morning she was dead. Cholly found her dead in her bed with one eye still open as if she had one more admonition for him.

Cholly had never attended a funeral before, much less received so much attention for being the principal mourner. All Aunt Jimmy's relatives and friends attended and they all decided that Essie Foster's peach cobbler had been the fatal blow. The mourners thought that Aunt Jimmy had been so good that she had eaten the cobbler to avoid hurting Essie's feelings by refusing her cobbler.

The funeral was held and was followed by a huge mean. Cholly had not yet felt the loss of his aunt because he had been receiving so much attention. It was decided that Cholly should go live with Aunt Jimmy's brother O.V. since he had room for the boy. Cholly didn't understand everything that was happening until people started dividing up her things right in front of him.

Cholly left the house to escape his relatives for awhile and he found that he actually did like some of his cousins. One cousin, in particular, named Jake seemed to be quite the

ladies man. He had convinced Suky to take a walk with him into the woods. Suky's friend, Darlene, agreed to go walking with Cholly and soon the two couples became separated.

Cholly and Darlene found themselves sitting and talking then he leaned over and kissed her. And soon they were fumbling with their clothes and they were moaning and that's when the light from some man's flashlight hit Cholly's naked backside. Two hunters had come upon the young couple and were egging them on all the while flashing their lights on them. Cholly looked at Darlene whose face was turned as far as she could get it into the darkness. He looked at her and hated her. Fortunately the two men left them alone to go after what their dog had found.

Cholly and Darlene collected themselves walked back to the house. That night as he tried to sleep he hated Darlene even more. It never occurred to him to hate the two hunters. That emotion would have killed him. He would have plenty of time to hate white men later. Now he could only direct the hate toward the person who had created the situation.

The next morning as he was waiting to leave with Uncle O.V., the thought occurred to him that Darlene might be pregnant. Fear overtook him and he decided to go where no one could find him so went to Macon to find his father. He ran away and he worked at odd jobs until he could pay for his fare to Macon.

When he arrived in Macon, he found his father at the end of an alley shooting craps. He asked a man which one was Samson Fuller and when he was pointed out to him, Cholly saw that they had similar eyes and mouths. Cholly approached his father but he couldn't think of anyway to tell his father who he was. His father assumed that Cholly was a boy running an errand for someone he owed money to. His father screamed at Cholly and the boy ran away until he found a quiet spot to compose himself. While was composing himself Cholly realized that he had soiled himself.

Cholly got up and ran until he reached the Ocmulgee River where he collapsed on the river bank. At the river Cholly slept until morning and washed himself and his clothes in the water. It is only then that Cholly cries for his Aunt Jimmy.

Cholly's life was composed of all the raw emotions that a boy experiences on the street; pain, joy, fear, anger, and lust. Cholly had been abandoned on a junk heap by his mother, rejected by his father in the middle of a crap game, and he now had nothing left to lose. In an odd way, this freed him like no other man was free and it was in this state of mind that he met Polly Williams.

She gave him a sameness which eventually drove him mad. At first her stability appealed to him but he became restless after awhile. The first time he saw her she was leaning against a fence rubbing her leg to quiet an itch. She awakened such joy in him that he wanted to be with her forever but he no longer has any interest in her at all. He wasn't really interested anything because he was numbed by alcohol.

And so as he staggered home one Saturday afternoon and saw his eleven-year-old daughter slumped over the kitchen sink, he felt a wave of pleasure wash over him. He knew that he was worthless to her and that he didn't deserve the love that shone out of her eyes. She lifted one foot and scratched the other leg which reminded him of the first time he ever saw his wife.

Cholly is consumed by desire for his daughter. He reaches for her, knocks her to the ground and rapes her. During the attack she faints. When he is finished he covers her with a quilt and leaves her lying on the kitchen floor, where her mother finds her. Pecola wakes up, with pain between her legs, to see her mother staring down at her.

SeeFather... Analysis

Cholly Breedlove doesn't always consider himself lucky that his great aunt rescued him from that junk heap that night but she does provide the best life she can for him. His life is one of work at a very young age and times are hard but his Aunt loves and cares for him. Blue comes into his life and teaches him some things about being a man but this little bit of comfort and tenderness come to an abrupt halt when his aunt dies. His father rejects him without knowing who he is and Cholly takes up with whores and street people to survive.

Oddly enough, the circumstances that force him onto the street, give him freedom. At a very young age, he has experienced most of life's tragedies, so there is nothing that anybody can take away from him anymore. When he meets Polly, his heart lifts because he finds love and stability again but he is been a restless creature and he can't stand the routine of married life. He is not interested in any part of his life and he tries to stay drunk all of the time.

When he sees Pecola mimic the same movement her mother had made on the day he first saw her, something stirs in Cholly. Cholly feels young and hopeful again. Cholly experiences a pleasure that he won't let go of. Holly pushes the guilt away because he hasn't felt pleasure is a long time and he looses his mind when it returns.

When he rapes his daughter, it is with a mixture of tenderness and rage. He loves her and the innocence he has never known and he hates her because he can't be a real father to her. He feels worthless because he can't give her anything or take her anywhere. His rage boils over and he sees Pecola as Darlene, the night that the hunters shone their flashlights on him. He hates the person who created the situation. He hates himself as well but in that moment he transfers his hatred to Pecola.

Cholly does not consider what he has done to his daughter or his family but Polly will soon determine the fate of all of them when she learns why her daughter is lying on the kitchen floor, under a quilt, in the middle of a Saturday afternoon.

SeeThe Dog...

SeeTheDog... Summary

Soaphead Church loves things because he can't stand people. He doesn't mind being thought of as a misanthrope because he has had a fine education and he knows that many fine people feel the same way he does. Soaphead considers any kind of communication or engagement with people as a form of charity.

It seems strange that Soaphead has chosen a career in the ministry as it brings him into close contact with people everyday. When that career didn't work out for him he became a caseworker and when that failed he became a psychic reader. The life of a psychic reader suits him quite well. He can enjoys the fact that he can set his own hours and that he can convince his clientele of things that they already believe. Soaphead maintains both his reserve and his celibacy.

He would have been a homosexual if it hadn't been for his own erectile problems and his distaste for anyone else's potency. He is repulsed by the thought of being with a woman but he considers little boys are to be too mean and too vocal to interest him. His sexual inclinations; therefore, are towards little girls. Little girls appeal to him because they are so pure and clean.

The man's real name is Elihue Micah Whitcomb but the people in town call him Soaphead because his curly hair holds a wave when slicked with soap lather and they call him Church due to his early days in the ministry. He was born on an island in the Caribbean and he came to America to study as most privileged island boys do. His path has finally led him to Lorain and the boarding house of Bertha Reese.

The house is perfect except for the woman's dog, Bob, who is old and sick with green matter coating its eyes shut all the time. Soaphead wishes that the dog would just die. He has even bought some poison to put in the dog's food but hasn't had the courage to do it yet.

Soaphead lives a peaceful live counseling the gullible and occasionally fantasizing about the little girls that he sees. One afternoon a little girl walks into the house and presents his business card which proclaims that he can help anyone with any distasteful situation. She stands in front of him, a thin, scrawny little black girl with a little pot of a tummy.

It takes him awhile but he eventually gets her to tell him what she has come to him to ask for. The little girl wants blue eyes. Soaphead is taken aback by her request. It is the most incredible, yet most practical, request he has ever had. This ugly little girl wants to be beautiful. He is fortified and humbled all at once and he hesitates before he proceeds. Soaphead makes the sign of the cross over her and tells her that he can work only with the Lord's help.

Soaphead stalls for time while he considers what he should do next and then it occurs to him when his eyes settle on old Bob. He tells her that she must make some sort of offering or sign and he produces a package of meat from an icebox. Soaphead then takes a bottle from his shelf, sprinkles some of the powder all over the meat and tells the girl to feed the meat to the dog. Soaphead claims that if the dog behaves as if nothing has happened, that means that God is ignoring the request but if the dog begins strange, then her request will be granted two days from now.

Soaphead bids the girl goodbye and closes the door so he can peek at her through the curtain. The dog sniffs the meat and then he devours it in four bites. Almost immediately the dog starts to moan. The dog throws himself down the back porch steps. When Pecola can no longer bear to watch him limp around the yard in pain, she runs away.

When she leaves, Soaphead sits down and writes a lengthy letter to God. Its purpose is to remind the Creator of things which he has ignored or that have escaped his notice. He tells him about love that has left his own life; of the firm little breasts of little girls; and the inequities of life in general. And he proceeds to say that he has done a work of mercy today for the little black girl who came for his help. Soaphead thinks that he has done something that God Himself has refused to do; because Soaphead's certain that the little girl has implored Him many times before. Soaphead has given the little girl hope. Soaphead tells himself that, "No one else will see her blue eyes but she will and she will live happily ever after." Soaphead closes the letter only after he tells God that he must be jealous of what he did.

SeeTheDog... Analysis

Superstition and folklore are still important to the colored population in the early 20th century. Even those who have eased themselves away from country life and moved to the city still believe in superstitions which is why Soaphead Church is so popular in town. Soaphead makes a living by reading people's needs and telling them what they have come to hear. Soaphead's privileged childhood has left him distant from other people and he can only connect with them when they need something from him. Fulfilling their need is his form of philanthropy in some odd way.

It's not clear if he had ever overstepped his bounds in any of his ministry or social work positions. It's possible that he has taken advantage of little girls entrusted to his care and that he has settled on this solitary, celibate life to protect any other little girls as well as himself.

So, Pecola left his house thinking that the gagging dog was a sign from heaven that she will have blue eyes in two days. In Soaphead's letter to God he convinces himself that he has done a great thing. At any rate, a dog is dead as will be the hope in the heart of a little girl who desperately needed some.

Summer

Summer Summary

Claudia and Frieda are selling packets of seeds for five cents each and if they sell more than anyone else they will win a new bicycle. Their mother has let them go door to door to sell the seeds, but only to the people they know on certain streets. Driven by their desire for the new bike the girls call on anyone who will let them in.

During their visits to these homes, the sisters are able to piece together a story. Apparently, some young girl is having her daddy's baby. Eventually, the sisters figure out that the girl is Pecola. Many of the people they speak too wonder if the baby will even live because the girl's mama gave her a such fierce beating when she found out that the girl was lucky to be alive. The father, Cholly Breedlove, had taken off already. Everyone says that the baby will be the ugliest thing around if it lives.

Frieda and Claudia determine that they will use the force of all their pride, pity, and willpower to make ensure that Pecola's baby will live. As their show of faith, they promise God that they will forego the chance at the bicycle and that they will bury the money they have so far in Pecola's yard. They also promise to plant the seeds in their own backyard so that the girls can watch over them and wait for a sign that everything will be ok.

Summer Analysis

At last the first sign of character and nobility appear in this story. Surprisingly the nobility of character is displayed by two little black girls who don't look capable of giving away anything. Frieda and Claudia understand Pecola's pain even though they haven't even seen her or talked to her since her secret got out. Their compassion for Pecola may come from the ever knowledge that their own fates run perilously parallel to hers or maybe there was a seed of kindness inside them, just waiting for the perfect time. And summer is the time for growth.

Look Look Here...

LookLookHere... Summary

Claudia and Frieda aren't friends with Pecola anymore. The girls used to see Pecola after the baby was born and died. They were her friends when the gossip was flying and people would turn their heads away from her on the street.

Now Pecola walks up and down the streets in some sort of madness with her head jerking all the time and her arms bent like wings but this isn't the reason the sisters don't see her anymore. They girls stay away because they think they have failed her. The seeds they planted in their own backyard never grew and they think this has had some part in Pecola's downfall.

Pecola and her mother live in a little house on the edge of town now. Cholly died in a workhouse and her brother ran away a long time ago. And Pecola spends her days among the sunflowers and the weeds looking for Coke bottles and other treasures in the trash. Pecola soaked up all the ugliness of all those around her so that by contrast, the rest of the world considered themselves to be smarter, or prettier, or more generous. Pecola escapes the only way she can… into madness. The sisters console themselves with the thought that maybe they had planted their flower seeds too deep or maybe the ground just wasn't right for flowers that year.

LookLookHere... Analysis

Pecola has convinced herself that people look away from her because her eyes are now too blue and too beautiful. In reality, people look away from her in disgust at what they assume to be a trashy, good-for-nothing girl who got what she deserved. Her baby has mercifully died because as she has slipped into madness she is in no way capable of caring for a child. But in her madness, she does have those sky blue eyes and she is beautiful and loved.

Frieda and Claudia stay friends with her as long as they can but they know that the possibility of her fate is ever present for them and they don't want to linger near her too long. and the sisters they convince themselves that it wasn't their fault that their seeds didn't grow and somehow influence Pecola's fate. It's only too true that some places on this earth are too hostile for anything to grow in.

Characters

Aunt Jimmy

Aunt Jimmy becomes Cholly Breedlove's guardian after rescuing the four-day-old child from the trash heap where his mother, her niece, had abandoned him When she is ill, Aunt Jimmy is instructed to drink only "pot liquor"; however, she "[dies] of peach cobbler" after eating a piece of pie.

Cholly Breedlove

Cholly Breedlove begins his life abandoned by his mother when he is only four days old. He spends most of his life in a state of abandonment, disconnected from those around him and, as the novel describes him, "dangerously free" because of his isolation. When his guardian, Aunt Jimmy, dies, he is Initiated into the world of racism as two hunters interrupt him having sex with a young black girl named Darlene and refuse to let the couple stop. He is unable to continue having sex and directs his hatred toward Darlene instead of toward the white men because, as the novel states, hatred for whites who are in a position of power would have consumed him totally and immediately. However, the hatred he directs toward Darlene gnaws at him his entire life. The day before he is to leave with the uncle appointed to be his guardian, Cholly leaves for Macon in search of his father who, when Cholly finds him, spurns him in favor of a game of craps. Cholly turns to alcohol, and although his early married life with Pauline contains some hopeful moments, for the most part, his existence is dismal. In a scene portraying a drunken Cholly's ultimate frustration at being unable to offer his children a better life than his, he rapes Pecola while visualizing her as the young Pauline. In the novel's last pages, the narrator reveals that Cholly finally dies in the workhouse.

Pauline Breedlove

Pauline Breedlove, mother of Pecola, is trapped by the same destructive force as her daughter: the unachievable desire for beauty. After stepping on a nail as an infant, Pauline is left with a deformed foot, an event that causes her to see her entire self as deformed in some way. As an adolescent, she buys into the myth of a "prince charming" who will sweep her off her feet, and she seems to find such a man in Cholly. Although their life together begins well, it quickly declines. Pauline struggles with loneliness and a loss of self-esteem after she loses a front tooth. She turns to Cholly for consolation, but he turns to alcohol instead of to her. She begins to take solace in going to movies and imagining herself as beautiful film star Jean Harlow. After Pauline loses another tooth while eating candy at a movie, she no longer cares about her physical appearance, and her relationship with Cholly, Pecola, and Sammy becomes the way we find it at the book's beginning: abusive and full of hatred. Pauline only finds satisfaction in working

for the Fishers, a white family that lives in a clean, affluent world, a world in total contrast to the one in which Pauline exists.

Pecola Breedlove

Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of Morrison's novel, is the truest of all victims, for she is an innocent little girl born into a family that does not provide her with any support to endure society's racial prejudices. When Pecola' lives temporarily with the MacTeers after her family is evicted from their apartment, we learn of her ob

session with white female beauty when she sits at the table with Claudia and Frieda to snack on milk and graham crackers. She continues to drink quart after quart of milk just to be able to use the cup with Shirley Temple's picture on it, almost as if she was trying to drink Shirley Temple's beauty. Much like her mother, Pecola longs to be beautiful, to have blue eyes specifically, because she thinks that fulfilling white society's idea of beauty will bring her the love she has never received. Pecola's life is consumed by this desire, and after she is raped by her father, she is so desperate that she goes to the town's pedophilic fortune teller, Soaphead Church, for help in obtaining blue eyes. Even the fraudulent Soaphead pities her and writes in a letter to God that he may not have been able to give Pecola blue eyes, but she thinks she has them and will, therefore, live "happily ever after." Soaphead is, of course, horribly mistaken, and Pecola descends into madness She continues believing that her eyes are bluer than any others, illustrating the danger for an unloved black girl who accepts white society's definition of beauty.

Sammy Breedlove

Brother of Pecola, Sammy Breedlove is a victim of his parents failed marriage and deals with their arguments by running away from home. The novel reveals that at fourteen Sammy has run away from home at least twenty-seven times, and the last mention of him in the novel states that he runs away for good some time before Pecola's descent into madness.

China

China is one of three prostitutes who lives in an apartment above the storefront where the Breedloves also live. The only trait that distinguishes China from the other two prostitutes is that she is constantly curling her hair. All three are characterized as cruel haters of men and disrespectful of women, yet these three prostitutes are among the very few characters in *The Bluest Eye* who are kind to Pecola.

Darlene

The young women with whom Cholly

Breedlove has his first sexual experience on the day of his Aunt Jimmy's funeral.

Samson Fuller

Samson Fuller is Cholly Breedlove's father, who left town for Macon before Cholly was born.

When Cholly locates his father after Aunt Jimmy's death, his father rejects him, his attention totally focused on a game of craps, leaving Cholly emotionally scarred.

Geraldine

Geraldine fits the type of middle-class black woman that Morrison describes in detail Just before Geraldine appears in *The Bluest Eye.* This kind of woman rejects what she views is "black" by distancing herself from the "funkiness" of life, the dirt of poverty, and ignorance. Geraldine has only a perfunctory relationship with her family and is closest to her cat, whom her son Junior throws against a wall after Pecola shows it affection. In Geraldine's eyes, Pecola represents the black lifestyle she rejects; therefore, when Geraldine discovers Pecola in her house, she throws Pecola out with the words, "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house."

Mr. Henry

Mr. Henry boards with the MacTeer family and endears himself to Frieda and Claudia by calling them Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers, popular film stars of the 1940s. Mr. Henry is involved in two important scenes in the book The first occurs when Claudia and Frieda return home from school and he gives them money for ice cream. They return before he expects them to, and they find him with China and Maginot Line, two of the town's prostitutes. When the women leave, Mr. Henry explains to the girls that these women were part of his Bible study group but that the girls should not tell their mother that the women were there. After this episode opens Mr. Henry's morality up to question, his depravity is confirmed when he is thrown out of the house for molesting Frieda.

Junior

Junior is the only son of Geraldine, an arrogant black woman who despises most other black families and, as a result, prevents Junior from playing with other black boys. Because he lives near the school, Junior claims the playground as his turf, and when he sees Pecola walking there, he invites her into his house and terrorizes her with his mother's cat.

Maginot Line

See Miss Mane

Claudia MacTeer

A nine-year-old black girl, Claudia narrates the majority of the novel. Because she and Pecola share many of the same experiences, Claudia also acts as a foil, or contrast, to Pecola. For example, Claudia hates Shirley Temple, unlike Pecola who idolizes her, and does not understand the fascination black adults have with little white girls Claudia is also a representative of society as a whole in her attitude toward Pecola. Although she and Frieda befriend Pecola after she lives with them temporarily, they have no contact with her after her father rapes and impregnates her. Claudia hopes that her baby will live simply to "counteract the universal love of white baby dolls"; however, the baby dies, and Claudia and Frieda avoid Pecola from then on. As an adult, Claudia realizes that she, like those around her, made Pecola into a scapegoat, hating Pecola in order to make her life appear much better in comparison.

Frieda MacTeer

Frieda is the sister of Claudia, the narrator of the novel She is a minor character, largely in the shadow of Claudia, but shares in most of her experiences and is, therefore, also part of the coming of age motif in the novel However, she is distinguished from Claudia a few places in the novel, such as when she knows that Pecola has begun menstruating when Pecola and Claudia have no idea why Pecola is bleeding, and also she appears apart from Claudia when she is molested by the MacTeer's boarder, Mr. Henry.

Miss Marie

The prostitute called Miss Mane by Pecola and Maginot Line by Claudia and Frieda is overweight and obsessed with food, a quality revealed in her passion at describing a meal eaten in the instant past and her habit of using food related nicknames for Pecola. She also has a knack for storytelling and amuses Pecola with stories of her former "boyfriends."

M'Dear

M'Dear, a midwife and practitioner of folk medicine, instructs Cholly's Aunt Jimmy to drink only "pot liquor" during an illness. People in the' community believe M'Dear possesses supernatural abilities and summon her when all other remedies are ineffective.

Maureen Peal

Maureen is a light-skinned, wealthy, African American girl who attends the same school as Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda. The girls resent her because she is adored by teachers and students, both black and white alike. Claudia and Frieda make up names for her, such as "Six-finger-dogtooth-meringue-pie," to express their resentment, but they are alone in their ridicule. Maureen does try to befriend Pecola, but she later turns against Pecola, calling her ugly and taunting her with accusations that she has seen her father naked.

Poland

Another of the prostitutes living above the Breedloves, Poland is characterized by her singing and her soundless laugh.

Polly

See Pauline Breedlove

Soaphead Church

A pedophile and misanthrope, Soaphead Church bills himself as a spiritualist, an interpreter of dreams, and a miracle worker, while in reality he is a fraud. The book details his sexual preferences for young girls as well as his family background, former professions, and failed marriage. He despises his landlady's mangy dog Bob, and when Pecola comes to him asking for blue eyes, he sees the perfect opportunity to rid himself of Bob. He gives Pecola poisoned meat to give to Bob, telling her that if the dog reacts to the meat, her eyes have become blue. Of course, the dog dies, leaving Pecola to believe that she truly does have blue eyes. In a letter to God, Soaphead admits that he did not attempt to molest Pecola because he truly pities her and actually wishes he could perform miracles.

Rosemary Villanucci

Rosemary Villanucci is a young white girl who lives next door to the MacTeers and always tattles on Claudia and Frieda.

Elihue Micah Whitcomb

See Soaphead Church

Pauline Williams

See Pauline Breedlove

Themes

Beauty

Morrison has been an open critic of several aspects of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and she has stated in numerous interviews that a primary Impetus for *The Bluest Eye* was the "Black is Beautiful" slogan of the movement, which was at its peak while Morrison wrote her first novel. Even though *The Bluest Eye* is set in the 1940s, Morrison integrates this pressure that blacks feel to live up to white society's standards of beauty with racism in general, and the reader sees quickly that several characters are indeed "in trouble" as a result of their obsession with beauty, especially Pecola and Pauline.

Of course, as the title indicates, Pecola's one desire is to have blue eyes, which to her are central to being beautiful and would enable her to transcend the ugliness of her life and perhaps change the behavior of her parents. Pecola worships the beautiful, white icons of the 1940s: she drinks three quarts of milk at the MacTeer's house so that she can use the cup with Shirley Temple's picture on it, buys Mary Janes at the candy store so that she can admire the picture of the blond haired, blue eyed girl on the wrapper, and even resorts to contacting Soaphead Church, thinking that perhaps he can make her eyes blue. By the novel's end, Pecola truly believes she has blue eyes, and her delusion is a tragic picture of the damage the ideals of white society can have on a young black girl who, seeing no other options, embraces them.

The situation of Pecola's mother is little better. Pauline's life is already marred in her eyes when as a child she steps on a nail and her foot is left deformed. After she marries Cholly, their life in Lorain, Ohio, does not turn out to be the fairy tale she expected, so she alleviates her loneliness by going to the movies. There, she is introduced, as the novel states, to the ideas of physical beauty and romantic love, "probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion." Pauline buys into the fantasy world she views in the theaters, even going so far as to wear her hair like the popular white actress Jean Harlow. Pauline's illusion is broken when she loses a tooth while eating candy at a movie. From then on, she "settled down to just being ugly" but finally finds a job working for a white family so that she can have the "beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise" absent from her own family. For example, when Pecola knocks a hot pie off the counter at the Fisher home, Pauline slaps and verbally abuses her because she disrupts her clean, white world; on the other hand, she comforts the weeping Fisher girl who is startled by the incident. Although Pauline does not become insane like Pecola does, her decline is still obvious, for she is unable to see beauty in herself or her family but only in the surrogate family which makes her feel "white."

Unlike Pecola and Pauline, Claudia MacTeer, the novel's main narrator, is able to overcome the standards for beauty society pushes upon her. Claudia hates Shirley Temple and cannot understand the fascination blacks have for little white girls Much to

the dismay of her family members who see her actions as ungrateful, Claudia dismembers a white doll she receives for Christmas "to see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me." Claudia does struggle with self-Image, as all in her community do, and she comments that they all made Pecola into a scapegoat because "we were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness." However, as she relates Pecola's story to the reader, she regrets their treatment of Pecola and realizes that even though she herself later learned to "worship" Shirley Temple, the change was "adjustment without improvement."

Coming of Age

The Bluest Eye has often been labeled by critics as a *bildungsroman,* or a novel that chronicles the process by which characters enter the adult world. As critic Susan Blake has stated, the novel is "a microscopic examination of that point where sexual experience, racial experience, and self-image intersect." For Pecola, this experience is not a pleasant one. Physically, when she begins to menstruate in the novel, Morrison uses this pivotal event in the life of any young girl to reveal the absence of love in Pecola's life. When Frieda confirms Pecola' s suspicion that she can now conceive, Frieda tells her that someone has to love her for that event to occur. In one of the most poignant scenes of the novel, she asks Frieda, "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" Foreshadowing Pecola's future, Frieda falls asleep without answering Pecola's question, leaving the reader to conclude that Pecola will never find love. Indeed, her mother rejects her and her father rapes her, leaving her to conceive a child who dies at birth. Of course, Pecola's realization that society defines ideal beauty in a figure completely opposite from the one she sees in the mirror every day also contributes to her initiation into adulthood. Again, she meets only destruction as she descends into insanity after the death of her child, finding emotional nourishment in her belief that she not only has blue eyes but has the bluest of them all

Fortunately, the process of growing up is much more productive for Claudia and Frieda MacTeer. They share numerous experiences with Pecola, but the way in which their family copes with certain situations reveals that they will not be eternally traumatized by the hardships of growing up but will become solid adults because of the love and stability of their family. For example, when Mr. Henry, the family's boarder, fondles Frieda, Mr. MacTeer kicks him out of the house, throwing a tricycle at him, and even shoots at him. On the other hand, not only does Cholly Breedlove not protect Pecola, but he is the very one who violates her, seeing in her the Pauline he once loved and transferring his self-hatred and lack of ability to provide a better life for his children into sexual aggression. Fortunately for Frieda and Claudia, their family is not crippled by negative emotions but able to cope with love.

Race and Racism

The fact that Pecola, Pauline, and Claudia must struggle with the fact that they do not fit white society's idea of beauty is part of the racism toward blacks that has existed ever since they were brought to the United States as slaves. As much as Morrison concentrates on this aspect of white racism, she includes other aspects of racism that involve black attitudes toward each other as well as white attitudes toward blacks.

First, Morrison presents white characters who treat black characters in a racist fashion. For example, when Pecola goes to the candy to store to buy Mary Janes, Mr. Yacobowski immediately expresses disgust at her presence. The narrator makes some allowances for his actions by emphasizing that he is simply different than Pecola, "a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth." However, he is also presented as a representative of all whites, as Pecola thinks to herself that she has seen this same disgust and "glazed separateness... lurking in the eyes of all white people."

Another example of racism by whites against blacks is a pivotal moment in the coming of age process for Cholly Breedlove. On the day of his Aunt Jimmy's funeral, Cholly goes with a neighborhood girl, Darlene, into the woods, and they have sex. This is Cholly's first sexual experience, and it becomes a defining moment in his life when two white hunters find him and Darlene together. The hunters force Cholly to continue having sex with Darlene as they observe and laugh. Cholly's humiliation makes him impotent, but he does not turn his hatred toward the white men because he knows that "hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke." Instead, he turns his hatred toward Darlene, one of his own kind, over whom be can feel power. This experience leads Cholly to search for his father, and when his father rejects him, he becomes "dangerously free" because he has nothing more to lose since he has lost his family and his dignity. This "freedom" Cholly finds is important later in the book, for while she reflects on Cholly's "love" for Pecola, Claudia states that "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man [Cholly] is never safe."

Not all of the racist acts and attitudes in the novel are between whites and blacks, however. Several important instances involve racism among black characters. First, Morrison presents the character Maureen Peal, a "high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back.". Maureen has everything that Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda lack: wealth, nice clothes, and beauty which brings her the admiration of whites and blacks alike. Claudia remarks that she and Frieda were fascinated but Irritated by Maureen, and they do anything they can to make her ugly in their minds-call her names and make fun of her few physical flaws. At one point, Maureen comes to the defense of Pecola, who is being harassed by a group of black boys because of her own blackness and the rumor that her father sleeps naked. Maureen seems genuine in her attempts to befriend Pecola, but when the paranoid Pecola mentions her father when Maureen asks her if she has ever seen a naked man,

Maureen begins to make fun of Pecola as well Claudia tries to beat up Maureen, mistakenly hitting Pecola instead, and leaving Maureen to shout at them, "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I *am* cute." Not only are Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola victimized by their peers who degrade them in favor of Maureen, but even Maureen uses her beauty against them because they refuse to bow to her. However, in an interview with author Gloria Naylor entitled, "A Conversation' Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison," Morrison states that Maureen suffers as much as Pecola does because she receives her self-esteem from society's approval of her beauty, not because she is confident and secure in who she is.

Finally, Morrison presents the character Geraldine, a representative of blacks who wish to "move up" in the world and assimilate into white culture and scour anything or anyone that reminds them they are black, an issue she also addresses in her novels *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby.* Morrison saw this kind of person as a problem in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the time during which she wrote *The Bluest Eye,* as she explains in her essay "Rediscovering Black History": "In the push toward middle-class respectability, we wanted tongue depressors sticking from every black man's coat pocket and briefcases swinging from every black hand In the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it " Geraldine is exactly this kind of woman, which Morrison describes in *The Bluest Eye* as "brown girls" who go to any length to eliminate the "funkiness" in their lives, anything that reminds them of the dirt, poverty, and Ignorance that they associate with being black. Specifically, Geraldine keeps her son Junior from playing with "niggers" and even makes a distinction between "niggers" and "colored people": "They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud." When Junior invites Pecola into his house and torments her with his mother's cat, Geraldine Immediately hates her, seeing her as one of the little black girls she had seen "all her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town. Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt." In her mind, Pecola is like a fly who has settled in her house and expels her with the words, "Get out.. You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house," leaving Pecola rejected again because of what others perceive as ugliness.

Style

Point of View and Structure.

The point of view in *The Bluest Eye* is dominated by first person ("I") through the mind of Claudia MacTeer, sometimes narrating as a nine-year-old child and sometimes as an adult The instances in which Morrison uses the adult Claudia as narrator serve as points of reflection for Claudia. For example, because Claudia is the same age as Pecola, she should be able to empathize with her; however, as an adult, she looks back at the manner in which she and her community cast Pecola as a scapegoat and is able to see that they did not love her as they should have. A third person, omniscient, anonymous narrator also exists in the novel For example, this narrator presents to us the childhoods and early adulthoods of Cholly and Pauline, providing a means for the reader to understand the path which has taken Cholly and Pauline to such depths of self-loathing. The narrative as a whole is the adult Claudia's flashback, framed by her adult musings and interspersed with scenes presented by the third person narrator. The novel is divided into four parts to correspond with the four seasons, an appropriate structure Since the main characters, nine-year-old girls, would measure time by passage of the seasons.

Setting

The setting of *The Bluest Eye* is a fictionalized Lorain, Ohio, in the 1940s. Morrison grew up in Lorain, the daughter of Southerners who had moved North to find employment, much as the Breedloves and MacTeers have done in the novel. Of course, schools are still segregated, and everyone is trying to recover from the Depression. Little is mentioned of the white neighborhoods in Lorain, although the book is scattered with white characters like Rosemary Villanucci and Mr. Yacobowski, who appear as reminders that this world does exist. Instead, Morrison focuses on the world in which the MacTeers and Breedloves live. Although both families are poor, the MacTeers are much better off, for the family is loving and stable For example, early in the book, Claudia describes their home as "old, cold, and green... peopled by roaches and mice." However, whatever the home might lack materially is made up for by the love that exists in the family. For example, although Mrs. MacTeer complains when an ill Claudia vomits on her bed, her love for her daughter is clear as during the night, "feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on [Claudia's] forehead." The Breedloves are equally as poor, but their family is characterized by violent physical battles between an angry Pauline and a drunken Cholly, not a love for their children and or one another.

Symbolism

The most obvious symbols found in *The Bluest Eye* are the popular female film stars of the 1940s who are mentioned throughout the novel: Jean Harlow, Greta Garbo, Ginger Rogers, and especially Shirley Temple. These women, of course, represent the standard of ideal beauty held up by white society, a standard that ultimately destroys Pecola.

Aside from these, three other important symbols operate in the novel: marigolds, the seasons, and the "Dick and Jane" reader. Marigolds are mentioned twice in the novel, at its beginning and at its end. In Frieda and Claudia's minds, the fact that the marigolds they plant do not grow results from the fact that Pecola is pregnant with Cholly's child. Although this take on the failure of the marigolds is an insightful one, Claudia herself makes a statement that leads the reader to a wider perception of the marigolds. After blaming herself and Frieda for the marigolds' failure, Claudia says, "It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding." The unyielding earth is an appropriate parallel for the world in which Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda live, a world that scorns blackness and worships white beauty. Claudia and Frieda manage, through the love of their family, to survive, but Pecola is devastated and cannot thrive in such a world, just as the marigold seeds cannot survive in this particular soil. In the last paragraph of the novel, Claudia says of the earth, "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." Although she is describing the earth, her words are an apt description of Pecola's situation. She is killed emotionally and mentally by her own father, by a white world, and in the end, the members of the community do not turn their scorn toward Cholly or toward White standards but toward Pecola, the ultimate victim.

Another aspect of nature, the seasons of the year, also operate symbolically in the novel. Morrison divides the novel into four sections, each corresponding to a season of the year. Appropriately, the novel begins with autumn: for children like Claudia, Pecola, and Frieda, autumn is a time of "beginnings," especially marked by the beginning of the school year. Indeed, this section does contain many "beginnings," for in this section, Claudia and Frieda first meet Pecola. Winter, of course, is traditionally a time of barrenness, and it is in winter that the girls become acquainted with Maureen Peal, a reminder to them that life is barren without beauty that brings admiration. This is also the section in the book in which Pecola is terrorized by Geraldine and her son Junior. One would hope for rebirth in the section entitled Spring. However, this title works ironically, for here, degradation occurs as Frieda is fondled by Mr. Henry and Pecola is abused by her mother for spilling the cobbler at the Fisher home and raped by her father. This is also the section in which the reader learns of the steady decline that has occurred in the lives of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove since their childhoods. The section entitled Summer is the shortest section of the book and does not present gleeful children reveling in the pleasures of summer but an isolated, insane Pecola.

Finally, Morrison uses clips from the Dick and Jane reader symbolically. The book opens with three excerpts from the Dick and Jane reader, which was the textbook used to teach every child to read from the 1940s through the 1960s. According to critic Phyllis R. Klotman, the three versions of the reader presented on the first page of *The Bluest Eye* represent the three lifestyles presented in the novel. The text of the first version is the standard text, with correct capitalization and punctuation, and represents the ideal white family represented in the novel by the Fishers. The second version contains the same words as the first but contains no punctuation or capitalization; this version symbolizes the MacTeer family, which is stable and loving but economically below a family like the Fishers. The final version, however, is completely disjointed, containing no punctuation or capitalization, not even spaces between words. This version, of course, represents the dysfunctional Breedlove family. A newspaper article commemorating the seventieth birthday of the "Dick and Jane" series says that the authors realize that the life presented in the series was very different from the life many children lived in the 1940. However, they believe, "When such deprived children lose themselves in stories about Dick, Jane, and Sally, and live for a time with these happy storybook characters, they experience the same release from their problems that the adult does when he loses himself in a good book or movie." Morrison, on the other hand, has recognized what these authors have not: that being inundated with a fantasy world that your family can never achieve does not provide release but leads to self-hatred, misanthropy, and insanity. As critic Susan Blake has written, "Pecola's story is a parody of the general fairy tale that she and her mother believe in," a fairy tale much like the lives of Dick and Jane.

Historical Context

Although Toni Morrison set her novel *The Bluest Eye* in the 1940s in the North, the thoughts that gave rise to the novel are centered in the Civil Rights Movement, which was waning in the late 1960s when she was writing *The Bluest Eye.* Many historians mark the peak year of the Civil Rights Movement at 1963 because of the pivotal events which took place during this year: the assassination of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) leader Medgar Evers, mass demonstrations led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Birmingham, Alabama, the attempt by Alabama Governor George Wallace to stop integration of Alabama's schools, and the March on Washington marked by Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. When Morrison published *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, the Civil Rights Movement was far from over; however, following its peak in 1963, white backlash increased. In addition, national attention turned to other events, such as the continuing Paris peace talks to end the Vietnam War, war protests by college students at Kent State University and other colleges, and the exposure of the massacre of unarmed civilians in My Lai, South Vietnam, by American troops. With such events taking place, the March on Washington must have seemed like decades ago to black activists who found it increasingly difficult for their voices to be heard. Progress seemed to halt as Congress approved bills designed to stop bussing of students to create racial balance in integrated schools and Governor Wallace encouraged governors across the South to ignore integration orders from Washington. As historian Harvard Sitkoff explains in his book *The Struggle for Black Equality:* 1954-1992, "The movement had secured basic civil rights for African-Americans, yet much remained to be done."

One of the most important slogans of the Civil Rights Movement was "Black is Beautiful," an attempt to raise the self-esteem of blacks who felt inferior to white standards of beauty. Morrison, however, found fault with this slogan, as she explains in her 1974 essay, "Rediscovering Black History": "The slogan provided a psychic crutch for the needy and a second (or first) glance from whites. Regardless of those questionable comforts, the phrase was nevertheless a full confession that white definitions were important to us (having to counteract them meant they were significant) and that the quest for physical beauty was both a good and worthwhile pursuit. When the strength of a people rests on its beauty, when the focus is on how one looks rather than what one is, we are in trouble." Morrison's hope at the time was that blacks would instead rely on the strength of their communities, instead of power, wealth, or beauty, an issue she explores further in her novel *Song of Solomon.* While the creators of the "Black is Beautiful" slogan were most assuredly well-intentioned, Morrison's point of view shows that the emphasis on physical beauty can be deadly for black children like Pecola Breedlove, whether in the 1970s or the 1940s or even the 1990s, who see all those around them bow to the Shirley Temples of the world and aspire to possess that kind of beauty in order to solve life's problems

Critical Overview

The Bluest Eye received an appreciative nod from critics at its appearance in 1970. Although Morrison was virtually unknown at the time, she seems to have taken offense at what she perceived as neglect of the book, for she wrote in the afterword to a 1993 edition of the novel, "with very few exceptions, the initial publication of *The Bluest Eye* was like Pecola's life: dismissed, trivialized, misread." Clearly, however, as Morrison's reputation as an author has grown, *The Bluest Eye* has received increased recognition and respect as a poignant portrayal of a black girl trapped by white society's ideals.

One aspect of the book that caught critical attention at the book's publication and continues to be a focal point for critics of Morrison's work is her use of language, which is often referred to as "poetic prose." John Leonard of the *New York Times* described the novel as containing "a prose so precise, so faithful to speech and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry " However, others, such as *New York Times Book Review* contributor Haskel Frankel, described Morrison's prose not as poetic but as inexact, marred by "fuzziness born of flights of poetic imagery."

Like many readers, Critics seemed disturbed by the book's content, not because It was irrelevant or trivial but because, as Liz Gant wrote in *Black World,* it is about "an aspect of the Black experience that many of us would rather forget, our hatred of ourselves." In *Freedom ways,* African American actress Ruby Dee described the novel's events as "painfully accurate impressions" which cause the reader to "ache for remedy."

Morrison's reputation has grown as she has garnered numerous honors and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for her novel *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, however, critics have not neglected *The Bluest Eye.* Contemporary assessments of the book tend to focus on the same matters of the early reviews: Morrison's writing style and the novel's portrayal of black victimization in America. For example, in her 1988 article in *The New Criterion,* Martha Bayles contends that "the book has flaws, but at its best it is an extraordinary fusion of poetic language and moral clarity" that is "even timelier today than it was eighteen years ago." Not all assessments are as favorable as Bayles', however. For example, in a 1987 article, Carol Iannone states that Morrison "crudely manipulates the assignment of judgment and blame in this book, refusing to transcend black and white as categories of good and evil. . .. Instead of exploring the universal theme which she herself has set into play-the fatal and terrifying lapses of love in the human heart-Miss Morrison sticks doggedly to her shallow dichotomies."

Not only has *The Bluest Eye* become a standard text in many colleges and universities in America, but It is often taught to high school students. As Ken Donelson reports in his article "'Filth' and 'Pure Filth' in Our Schools-Censorship of Classroom Books in the Last Ten Years," *The Bluest Eye* came under attack at least four times between 1986 and 1995, according to the American Library Association's *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom.* Those who wish to ban the book from the classroom tend to focus on its explicit language and sexual content. One principal involved in a 1995 incident said, "It

was a very controversial book, it contains lots of very graphic descriptions and lots of disturbing language." Despite such responses, the book continues to flourish and was reissued in 1994 with a new afterword by Morrison.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is a professor of English at Adrian College. In the following essay, she examines the critical history of The Bluest Eye *and how various aspects such as characterization, plot, and structure contribute to its portrayal of racism and the search for identity.*

Tom Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. Set in Morrison's home town of Lorain, Ohio, the novel tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl convinced of her own ugliness who desires nothing more than to have blue eyes. On the first page of the novel, Morrison tells the reader in advance everything that will happen in the pages to follow. Indeed, Morrison alludes to the central event of the book in the first two sentences:

"Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow." Morrison places importance not so much on *what* happens as on *how* and *why* Pecola Breedlove descends into inevitable madness.

Early reviews of *The Bluest Eye* were favorable, if subdued. Morrison, in an afterword to the 1994 edition of the novel, expresses her dissatisfaction with the reception the novel initially received: "with very few exceptions, the initial publication of *The Bluest Eye* was like Pecola's life: dismissed, trivialized, misread." And it has taken twenty-five years for her to gain respect for this publication.

Critical attention to *The Bluest Eye* was also slow in coming. The subsequent publication of her novels *Sula* in 1973, *Song of Solomon* in 1977, and *Tar Baby* in 1981 increased dramatically the volume of studies on Morrison's work. Certainly, after Morrison's selection as a Pulitzer Prize winner following the publication of *Beloved* in 1987, critics turned their gazes back to her earlier novels, looking for the origin of themes and controlling images that found expression in Morrison's later work.

In an early critique of *The Bluest Eye,* Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi concentrates on the structure of the novel, noting the "triadic patterns," patterns that appear in threes, present in the work. Further, this writer examines the scapegoating in the novel, ranging from Geraldine's cat, to Bob the dog, and finally to Pecola herself. More recently, Terry Otten, in his book *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Tony Morrison,* published in 1989, argues that the theme of *The Bluest Eye* is "failed innocence." Further, he believes that Morrison "depicts how American Society has substituted beauty for virtue" Likewise, Denise Heinze in her 1993 *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness"; Toni Morrison's Novels* examines the ideas of beauty and ugliness in *The Bluest Eye* She argues that the African-American community in the novel has internalized "the insidious and lethal standard of westernized beauty" symbolized by blue eyes. Finally, in a long article appearing in the winter 1994 issue of *MELUS,* Patrice Cormier-Hamilton takes as her subject self-realization. She writes, "A universal characteristic of Morrison's

published novels has been her depiction of male and female protagonists failing or succeeding on the difficult journey to freedom through self-awareness".

Tom Morrison herself offers readers insight to her book in the afterword included in the 1994 edition of *The Bluest Eye.* She recalls how at the time she started elementary school, a young friend told her that she wanted to have blue eyes. Morrison writes, *"The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale? The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her."

Morrison also discusses the problems she had with writing the novel as well as describing places she feels the novel does not succeed She expresses dissatisfaction with her solution to the problem of placing so much of "the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character.." In addition, although Morrison writes that she was "pressing for a female expressiveness" in the novel, she believes that she was unable to achieve this expressiveness, except, ironically, in the section describing Cholly's abuse by the white men who forced him to have sex with his young girlfriend.

Obviously, there are any number of possible starting places for a reading of *The Bluest Eye* At the heart of the novel are the themes of racism, within and outside of the African-American community; the loss of innocence and its consequences; and the implications of the way a culture defines beauty and ugliness Morrison explores these themes through her characters, her plot, her dialogue, and through the framing devices she chooses the structure the novel.

The first framing device strikes the reader immediately upon opening the book. In a sort of preface to the book, Morrison has written a parody of the Dick and Jane primary reader story. In this preface, Morrison first writes the story of Dick and Jane in perfect, primer prose. The images are of a happy, "normal," family. Without a pause, Morrison launches into the second telling of the story, identical to the first, but absent punctuation and capital letters. In the third telling, the prose is rendered nearly unintelligible because of the absence of not only punctuation and capital letters, but also of spaces between the words. Thus, in just three paragraphs, Morrison demonstrates the destruction of the "nonnative" model of American life into a mad jumble of letters on a page.

Morrison returns to the Dick and Jane story several times through the text to head a chapter. These headings provide a foreshadowing of what the chapter will bring. For example, the first heading is "HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHERANDWHITWHITEHOUSETHEYAREVERYH." The chapter that follows is a description of life inside the two room apartment where the four Breedloves lives in abject and violent poverty. We see immediately that the headings of the chapters are used ironically, to contrast the "ideal" world of the primary school picture book family with that of the Breedloves of Lorain, Ohio. It is the disparity

between the way the picture book family lives and the way the Breedloves live that propels the novel.

The second appearance of the Dick and Jane heading begins "SEETHECATITGOESMEOWMEOW" In this chapter, Morrison describes a particular type of African-American woman who comes from the South to the North, determined to wipe all traces of blackness from her life. These women work their whole lives trying "to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions." Morrison creates Geraldine in this mold in order to represent the ways in which "Mobile women" have internalized the ideals and values of the majority culture. Geraldine's violent rejection of Pecola in the belief that the child has killed her cat demonstrates the way that she wants to reject everything associated with her own cultural heritage. Further, her rejection of Pecola and blackness illustrates again to Pecola her own lack of worth.

Morrison chooses carefully the subsequent chapters she heads with fragments of the Dick and Jane story. In two of these chapters she gives biographical information about Pauline and Cholly to illustrate how far their lives are from the "Ideal" world of Dick and Jane. Significantly, the chapter headed with "SEEFATHERHEISBIGANS'IRONG FATHERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJANE ..." includes Cholly's rape of Pecola. In each instance, the chapter heading signals the reader that an illustration of the disintegration of the Breedlove family is to follow. Further, in each instance, Morrison is providing both the "how" and the "why" of Pecola's ultimate madness.

Morrison writes, "LOOKLOOKHERECOMES AFRIENDTHEFRIENDWILLPLAYWITHJANE.. .." as the heading for last chapter. This chapter opens with what appears to be a dialogue between Pecola and someone else. However, it becomes clear that this is not a dialogue between two people, but rather a dialogue between Pecola and herself. Now insane, she contemplates her new blue eyes with her "friend." We find through this "dialogue" that Cholly has continued to abuse his daughter and that Pauline no longer even speaks to her daughter. We also find that the disintegration of Pecola and her family is complete.

In addition to the Dick and Jane story, Morrison frames her story by using Claudia as an adult narrator at the beginning and the end of the story. Through Claudia's adult voice, we come to understand that the events of the novel have happened in the past. Like all stories, this one has achieved significance with time. We can see that Claudia's childhood understanding of the events in Pecola's life are different with the truths she now reads in the story: "For years I though my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. .. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth " The adult Claudia seems to be able to absolve herself of her childhood guilt over the death of Pecola's baby and over Pecola's fate. Nevertheless, in the epilogue, when the adult Claudia's voice returns to close the story, it is as if she reassumes the guilt, making it universal, making the entire community complicit in the disintegration of one small black child. "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. All of us-who knew her felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness." In the final paragraphs, Claudia indicts all of us for our easy acceptance of outward appearance as measure of worth, for our blind willingness to define beauty as white, blonde, and blue-eyed, and for our inability to love and nurture a child.

Source: Diane Henningfe1d, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Lee interprets Morrison's The Bluest Eye *as a failed quest for self.*

One of the more interesting characteristics of Toni Morrison's four *novels-The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Tar Baby* (1981)-is that each is a part of a whole. They reveal a consistency in Morrison's vision of the human condition, particularly in her preoccupation with the effect of the community on the individual's achievement and retention of an integrated, acceptable self. In treating this subject, she draws recurrently on myth and legend for story pattern and characters, returning repeatedly to the theory of *quest* as a motivating and organizing device. The goals her characters seek to achieve are similar in their deepest implications, and yet the degree to which they attain them varies radically because each novel is cast in unique human terms. Moreover, the theme of quest is always underscored by ironic insights and intensely evocative imagery. An exploration of these distinguishing qualities, technical and thematic, enhances one's appreciation of her achievement.

The Bluest Eye, Morrison's first novel, presents a failed quest culminating in madness. The young Pecola Breedlove searches painfully for self-esteem as a means of imposing order on the chaos of her world. Because a sense of self-worth and the correlative stability that would accompany it are unavailable to her in the familial or wider environment, she retreats to a subjective world of fantasy. The novel is framed in several ways, first by the young narrator Claudia, then by chronological time. The story spans a year, moving through "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring," and "Summer." By means of the seasonal cycle and the fact that the girls are entering puberty, Morrison suggests a tale of growth and the eventual fruition of "Summer." The imagery of the prologue, however, immediately undercuts this promise.

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that It was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. It never occurred to either of us that the earth may have been unyielding.

The newly matured Claudia realizes in retrospect that the environment was "unyielding" to both marigold seeds and Pecola Breedlove.

The familiar elementary school story of Dick and Jane provides another ironic frame for Pecola's circumstances:

Here is the house. It is green and white It has a red door It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the ... house. They are very happy who will play with Jane? See the cat.. See Mother. Mother is very nice Mother laughs... See Father. He is big and strong. Father is smiling. See the dog. . Here comes a friend.

The friend will play with Jane....

For each segment of this idealized picture of secure family life, Morrison offers in counterpoint the bleak specifics of Pecola's existence: shabby home, bitter and hostile parents, and two encounters with animals that are death-giving to her spirit and sanity.

Her parents' problems forecast defeat for Pecola's quest before her birth, and the coming of children only gives them a target for their frustrations. The father's life is a study in rejection and humiliation caused and intensified by poverty and Blackness. He learns early to deal with his hatred against those who cause his Impotence by turning it against those who witness it. The mother's love for him decays as insistently as specks appear in her untreated teeth and in proportion to his inability to fill the spaces of loneliness within her. She avenges herself on Cholly by forcing him to indulge in the weaknesses she despises and seeks redemptive suffering through enduring him. Neglecting her own house, children, and husband, she derives satisfaction only from the house in which she is a maid for It offers her a pathetically illusory sense of "power, praise and luxury." After all, she is conceived to be the "Ideal servant" there. Gentle with her employers' children, into her own daughter she beats "a fear of life.'" Neither parent possesses a sense of self-esteem which might be communicated to the child. Their name-Breedlove-is almost too obviously ironic.

The abandoned store in which this family "festers together in the debris of a realtor's whim" can offer no gratification. The furniture, like the store, has the advantage of being affordable. The fabric of the sofa, like that of their lives, "had split straight across the back by the time it was delivered".

Morrison speaks often of the ugliness of the Breedloves, of their "wearing" this ugliness, out of "conviction," a belief confirmed for them by the responses of their world to them. Pecola's search for an acceptable face, that is to say self, as she shrinks beneath this "mantle," "shroud," "mask," of ugliness is the center of this novel. Her failure to find it other than in fantasy is Morrison's indictment of the society which deprives her of any sense of self-worth. The ugliness leads us to the Image in her title. In order for Pecola to feel acceptable, she must ensure her self by possessing not only blue eyes but the bluest eyes created. Anything less is to live precariously, on the edge of an abyss.

The bluest eyes which represent the epitome of desirability to Pecola are possessed by the doll Claudia receives one Christmas. Claudia resents the doll and destroys it but comes to feel shame for her violence and hatred of both It and her similarly favored Shirley Temple cup She sublimates her dislike in "fraudulent love.'" Pecola worships more truly, taking every opportunity to drink out of It "just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face.'" In these autumn days she also spends her pennies for Mary Janes, which bear a smiling white face, "Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane, Love Mary Jane, Be Mary Jane.'"

Winter brings intensified chill outside and within Pecola as she increasingly rejects herself. It seems briefly that she will find acceptance with her peers minimally

compensatory for the other voids in her life. She is attached to Maureen Peal, the "high yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back" This relationship fulfills the metaphor's violent promise when Maureen, herself threatened, takes refuge in her beauty and attacks Pecola's ugliness. Responding, Pecola "seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing."' Folding inward is the direction her quest takes. When her parents fight, "Please God [she whispers], please make me disappear. She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away." One by one they all go until only her eyes remain. "Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left." If she could make those eyes beautiful, "she herself would be different." When she had bought the Mary Janes, she had sensed she was invisible to the storekeeper, sensed "his total lack of human recognition." She is invisible as an individual, of course, but the metaphor is reified in Pecola's consciousness. Her sense of being is literally in danger.

Through a chance encounter, she enters the house of a lighter-skinned middle-class boy whose caste-conscious mother ejects her with soul-killing words. To this woman, a type of character recurrent in Morrison's work, Pecola represents all the dirt and disorder which she has managed to shut out of her artificial but neat environment, and she is therefore vicious.

In "Spring," ironically, Pecola's growth is increasingly stunted as she draws nearer her personal abyss. Her mother confirms the child's sense of rejection as she throws her out of the spotless kitchen in which she is employed. She threatens the peace in this one ordered space of Mrs. Breedlove's life. Finally her father violates her body as the others have violated her spirit. Guilt, impotence, and-strangely-tenderness motivate his drunken rape of Pecola. His body is, after all, all he has to offer his daughter and with it he tries to penetrate to her soul. Instead, he pushes her into final withdrawal The waning days of the season detail Pecola' s encounter with Soaphead Church, who is a study of alienation, loss of identity and self-respect, and, once more, the futile search for order He, like other characters in this and the other novels, compensates for a lack of self-worth with a pathological hatred of disorder and decay. Because he is a neighborhood seer, Pecola comes to him petitioning for blue eyes. Because she so "lowers herself' to come to him, he "gives" them to her by means of a contrived "miracle." Thus is Pecola re-created: permanently blue-eyed-and mad.

What could be left for "Summer"? The quest surely has ended. Yet Morrison gives us a closer look at the child and in so doing intensifies the pain with which this novel leaves us. We see Pecola, fragmented, engaged in a dialogue with self, i.e., the imaginary friend she has created. We hear her plea for reassurance that her eyes are the *bluest* and that her "friend" will not abandon her. "The damage done was total," Claudia says. "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment."

She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, her head yielding to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly.

Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void It could not reach-could not even see-but which filled the valleys of the mind.

There is a resonance to "blue" and to "void" and to the images of flight that we will encounter again in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* as they point us toward the quest for selfhood.

Morrison concludes *The Bluest Eye* with Claudia's indictment of the society which "cleaned itself' on Pecola. As the girl searches the garbage for "the thing we assassinated" (her self?), Claudia reflects that "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." The novel thus comes full circle to the images of infertility with which it began, and this search for a whole self is finished. We also understand that Pecola' s doomed quest is but a heightened version of that of her parents, of Church, and of countless others in her world....

That Toni Morrison's novels constitute a continuum seems evident. She has, beginning with *The Bluest Eye,* been interested in the effect of community acceptance or rejection on the individual. She has consistently focused on the quest for self acceptance and wholeness as seen again in *Sula.* In *Song of Solomon,* she asks that we come to terms with origins and acquire an awareness of false standards of evaluation. In *Tar Baby,* all of these themes reappear. Yet, though there are unifying aspects in her novels, there is not a dully repetitive sameness. Each casts the problems in specific, imaginative terms, and the exquisite, poetic language awakens our senses as she communicates an often ironic vision with moving imagery. Each novel reveals the acuity of her perception of psychological motivation-of the female especially, of the Black particularly, and of the human generally. Source: Dorothy H Lee, "The Quest for Self Triumph and Failure In the Works of Tom Morrison," in *Black Women Writers (1959-1980)' A Critical Evaluation,* edited by Man Evans, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984, pp. 346-60.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, de Weever explores the crisis of black identity when cultural values are defined by a white society in Morrison's novel The Bluest Eye.

It used to be that black magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet,* barometers of the levels of black consciousness, carried advertisements for bleaching creams and hair-straighteners. Since the growth of black appreciation of natural color and texture and the advent of the slogan "Black is Beautiful," formed in protest to white standards of beauty, notices for bleaching creams no longer appear, although those for hair-straighteners still do. These illustrate the black woman's dilemma in a world where her white sisters are admonished: "Be a blond." "If you have one life to live, live it as a blond." Occasionally, one sees a black "blond" in the street or in the subway, vividly proclaiming the contradictions of her Identity and of her society.

Bombarded on all sides to conform to an impossible standard of beauty, some women become confused and succumb to a psychological crisis. Black male writers have dealt with the crisis in different ways, [Richard] Wright in *Native Son* and [Ralph] Ellison in *Invisible Man,* presenting it in terms of the hero's conception of himself and of his place in society, while the identity Crisis in women's lives appears only briefly The narrator in *Invisible Man* notices a sign in a shop-window in Harlem:

You too can be truly beautiful with greater happiness with whiter complexion be outstanding in your social set.

The narrator feels a savage urge to push his fist through the pane, but does not apply the admonition to himself. Ellison does not examine the ramifications of the sign, keeping his focus on the male hero, whose identity problems take a different form.

The apparent "throw-away" lines in Ellison's novel become the main theme of Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* A woman may whiten her skin, straighten her hair and change its color, but she cannot change the color of her eyes. The desire to transform one's identity, itself an inverted desire, becomes the desire for blue eyes and is a symptom of Pecola's instability She goes mad at the end of the novel. In Morrison's second novel, *Sula,* the Identity crisis becomes the attempt to create a self where there is none. The heroine fails, and dies although not as a direct result of her failure. Morrison presents an inverted world in both novels; her two heroines find no help as they grope towards possession of an identity. Neither the inner nor outer world provides any support because both appear to have turned upside down.

The Bluest Eye introduces the reader to this topsy-turvy world at the very beginning with a paragraph from the First Grade Reader. Printed at first with the structure of simple sentences, it is repeated without punctuation, then without spaces between the words'

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door It is very pretty. Here is the family, Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house They are very

happy. See Jane She has a red dress She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat it goes meow-meow.

The sentences layout the clear, simple, synthetic world of the storybook Repeated, without punctuation, this world is still recognizable:

Here is the house It is green and white it has a red door It is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy....

The third time the paragraph appears, there are no boundaries of spacing or punctuation; the sentences approach the psychic confusion of the novel:

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisvery
prettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandJanelive
inthegreenandwlutehousetheyareveryhappyseeJaneshehasareddressshewants
toplaywhowillplaywithjane ...

Individual space has disappeared as it does in the novel; the father intrudes on and violates the child's space. The clear structure of the storybook world is wrecked as Pecola's life is wrecked All the elements of the novel are here. The cat and the dog of the Reader appear in sinister form in the novel: the black cat has blue eyes, the blue eyes which haunt Pecola, and the dog writhes as it dies of poison, the sign Pecola must look for that her eyes have become blue Then Pecola, who is Jane of the First Grade Reader, invents the friend who comes to play with her as she enters the world of insanity.

The Bluest Eye is divided broadly into two parts Claudia, the narrator of one part, appears with her sister Frieda in the sections marked *Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer;* the time of the novel spans one year. Claudia tells the story from her point of view, presenting the world of three little black girls who are given presents of white, blue-eyed, yellow-haired dolls, and whose cups are adorned with Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Claudia thinks that Shirley Temple is squint-eyed, and that the dolls have moronic eyes, pancake faces, and orange-worms hair Her revulsion protects her from the deadly seduction which claims Pecola at the end of the novel. Claudia destroys the dolls, taking them apart to discover their secret as she would like to take apart little white girls to discover *their* secret What did they possess to make even black women consider them cute, sweet, beautiful? Why were not Claudia and Frieda beautiful? Claudia thus articulates the theme of the novel. She and Frieda confront the same world which destroys Pecola, but a stable family life supports them. Pecola has no support

The Breedloves, Pecola's family, are the people of the Reader. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane are Mrs. Breedlove, Cholly, Sammy, and Pecola, and their story forms Part Two of the novel. Sentences from the Reader introduce this story, indicating their inner confusion and general desolation. Just as the lines from the Reader run together, without boundaries or punctuation, so the family lives together without the structure of a

strong relationship or the punctuation of loving gestures or deeds.
HEREISTHEHOUSETHISGREENANDWHITEITHAS

AREDOORITISVERYPREITYTHISVERYPREITYPRETTYPRETTY

This heading introduces the description of the Breedloves's apartment. It is not a pretty house, but a storefront apartment. Each section on the Breedloves appears under the appropriate sentences from the Reader printed the same way. The fight between Mrs. Breedlove and Cholly is introduced by:

HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATIFFIRDICKAND

JANETHEYLIVEINTHEGREENANDWHITEHOUSETHEYAREVERY

The Breedloves breed not love but disgust in each other. Pauline Breedlove, lame in one foot, believes she is ugly, and bears children she thinks are ugly.

. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely, and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction.

Mrs. Breedlove, Mother of the Reader, does not play with Pecola; she knocks her down in the kitchen of her white employers when she spills the blueberry cobbler, but turns, immediately, to soothe the little white girl who calls her Polly. No tenderness for her own black child, but tenderness for the white one. This is Pecola's inverted world. Pecola and Mrs. Breedlove are not very happy in their storefront apartment or in their relationship to each other.

Mrs. Breedlove is an artist at heart, fascinated with colors. Lacking paints and crayons, she cannot express her rainbow. She retreats into the fantasy world of movies, combs her hair like Jean Harlow's, pretends she is Jean Harlow, and thinks: "The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show."

Sex with Cholly causes the colors to rise, to float up, within her, but she does not know how to express them. In her frustration and belief in her own ugliness, she fights Cholly and beats her daughter.

When her parents fight, Pecola thinks that if she had blue eyes her parents would do lovely things for her eyes to see. Her consolation is buying and eating her favorite candy, the Mary Jane with Mary Jane's picture on the wrapper: white face, blond hair, blue eyes, the same combination that Claudia so ardently destroys.

To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane, Love Mary Jane, be Mary Jane.

This symbolic cannibalism is a Sign of Pecola' s latent instability. The desire for blue eyes is evidence of Pecola's dissatisfaction with her identity, with her world, and of her longing for something better, which, at twelve years old, she has no way of providing for herself. The desire for blue eyes is part of the inverted quality of her world; in wanting blue eyes, Pecola wants, in fact, to be white.

Reinforcing Pecola's sense that she is ugly are the episodes of Maureen Peal and Geraldine. Maureen Peal is "a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back." Maureen, a different shade of black, is everything Claudia and Frieda are not. She knows it, and screams at them:

"You are ugly. Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute."

She forces Claudia to ask: "What was the secret? What did we lack?" In asking the question, Claudia admits her acceptance of Maureen's standard of beauty; yet by describing Maureen's braids as "lynch ropes" the author indicates a sinister quality of such beauty, at the same time acknowledging the white ancestor responsible for those ropes. The episode leads into the section on plain, brown Geraldine, who represents still another shade of black. She belongs to the "colored people," different from niggers. "Colored people are neat and quiet; niggers are dirty and loud." In Geraldine's beautiful gold and green house, Pecola meets the black cat with blue eyes, and the blue eyes in the black face hold her. Geraldine, however, tells her to get out of her house: "Get out," she tells her in a quiet voice, "You nasty little black bitch."

The men in the novel form part of the inverted world. Cholly is big and strong, like Father, but he does not smile, and he rapes his daughter. Mr. Henry, the roomer who gives the impression that he is "picky" with women, entertains the town whores in Mrs. McTeer's living room, and snatches at Frieda's budding breasts. Soaphead Church, of decayed West Indian aristocratic family, lives behind the candy store and gives readings But he also entertains little girls, to whom he gives mints and money, and who eat ice cream while he plays with them The sweat, the smells, the groans of adult women disgust him; there is none of that with little girls. Pecola's rape is set in this context of varying degrees of child molestation, and thus seems almost inevitable.

Everyone wants Pecola's baby dead before it is born in a world of universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temple cups, and Maureen Peals. Pecola, left alone, invents the friend who comes to play with her:

LOOKLOOKHERECOMESAFRIENDTHEFRIEND
WILLPLAYWITHJANETHEYWILLPLAYAGOOD GAMEPLA YJANEPLA Y

Pecola retreats into her mad world to enjoy her blue eyes, bluer than any other, and Claudia voices the psychic contradictions of the sane'

We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made her think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent.

Her poverty kept us generous Even her waking dreams we used-to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt.

... Morrison's novels depict the helplessness of Pecola and Sula before the ambiguities and paradoxes of their lives. Both suggest that the struggle to establish identity in a world which does not acknowledge one's existence is sometimes lost. The inverted world in which Pecola finds herself gives no support or guidance to a twelve-year-old struggling to find a self; the inverted quality of Sula's life leads to the great negation, death. It is a bleak vision that Morrison presents.

Source: Jacqueline de Weever, "The Inverted World of Torn Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula,"* in *CIA Journal,* Vol. XXII, No.4, June, 1979, pp. 402-14.

Adaptations

An abridged version of *The Bluest Eye* was recorded on two audio cassettes in 1994 by Morrison and actress Ruby Dee. Available from Random House Audiobooks, the cassette is three hours long

The unabridged text of *The Bluest Eye* was recorded in 1981 by Michelle Shay. Available from Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, the recording is distributed by National Library Service and lasts 704 minutes.

Topics for Further Study

Research the life and career of Shirley Temple, the child star whom Pecola sees as the epitome of female beauty. What about Shirley Temple made her idolized by white society? Then, examine Pecola's admiration of Shirley Temple. How does Pecola's admiration of Shirley Temple affect her throughout the novel?

Many critics consider *The Bluest Eye* to be a *bildungsroman,* a story outlining the maturing process of a character. Analyze the ways in which Claudia and Pecola both mature. Why do they mature into very different people even though they share many of the same experiences?

Although *The Bluest Eye* does not take place in the South, many characters in the novel are victims of racism Investigate life for African Americans, in both the North and South, during the 1940s, and compare your findings to the treatment of characters in the book.

Compare and Contrast

1940s: The United States became involved in World War II in 1941 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The war ended the Great Depression as well as American isolationism. The United States government's fear of the Soviet Union as a major communist force marked the beginning of the Cold War.

1960s: The United States became involved in several international conflicts, including the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, and the Vietnam War beginning in 1965. Low public opinion of American involvement in Vietnam was marked by protests across the country, especially on college campuses. In 1968, United States involvement hit its peak with approximately 500,000 troops in Vietnam. Approximately 58,000 United States troops were killed in the war.

Today: Foreign relations in the 1990s have been marked by the fall of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe, heralding the end of the Cold War. The only major military conflict in which the United States had been involved extensively was the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

1940s: Most households listened to the radio an average of 4.5 hours per day during World War II, with 30 percent of air time devoted to war coverage. However, serials starring heroes like Dick Tracy and Superman also aired. Movies also continued to be popular, with around 100 million people attending each week.

1960s: Television took the place of radio and provided footage of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and American politics. By 1970, 95 percent of American homes owned a television, a higher percentage than owned a refrigerator or an indoor toilet. Popular television shows were family-oriented sitcoms like "Leave It to Beaver" and police dramas such as "The Untouchables."

Today: Televisions continues to be an integral part of life, bringing news events into our homes as they happen. According to Nielsen Media Research, Americans in 1995 watched over eighteen hours of television per week. Also, the advent of video cassette recorders has made taping television programs or watching movies in one's own home popular. Computers have provided another form of entertainment, as Americans spend hundreds of hours playing computer games, sending or receiving electronic mail, or "surfing" the Internet.

1940s: Unemployment plummeted from a high of 14.6 percent in 1940 to 1.9 percent in 1945 as the need for supplies and the absence of soldiers at war created jobs, especially for women and minorities.

1960s: Unemployment held steady at around 5 percent, taking a slight drop in the late 1960s as a result of the Vietnam War

Today: Throughout the 1990s, the unemployment rate has remained steady at 5 percent to 7 percent, as American is centered in an economy reliant on global commerce.

1940s: Public schools remained segregated. Segregation in the armed forces officially ended in 1948, and new laws aimed at stopping discrimination in hiring practices were put into place. In practice, however, segregation and discrimination continued.

1960s: The 1960s were marked by the Civil Rights Movement, which included activities such as lunch counter sit-ins, integration of schools and colleges, and nonviolent protests led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., all aimed at procuring equal rights for black Americans. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 officially outlawed discrimination in all public accommodations and in hiring practices.

Today: Race relations remain tense. Public schools are integrated, but issues of achieving racial balance still plague school districts. Tensions often erupt into civil unrest, such as the riots in Los Angeles after an all white jury acquitted four police officers of all but one charge in the beating of black motorist Rodney King.

What Do I Read Next?

Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple,* printed in 1982, uses Celie's letters to God to chronicle her rise from a browbeaten woman, who is forced by her abusive father to marry an abusive husband and is separated from her sister and only friend, Nettie, to a self-confident business woman who learns to love others and herself, largely through her friendship with her husband's lover, Shug Avery.

Maxine Hong Kingston's 1976 novel, *The Woman Warrior,* records the struggles of the narrator who must reconcile the values of her Chinese immigrant parents, especially her mother, and her own adopted American values. Published in 1977, Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* presents the geographical and psychological journey of Milkman Dead from a life of empty affluence to self-knowledge and reunion with community as he rediscovers his family's past.

Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony,* printed in 1977, illustrates cultural conflict faced by Tayo, a young man of Native American and white parentage. As a result, Tayo must become reconnected with his Native American roots. After returning from World War II, Tayo finds that he is no longer respected by whites as a soldier and former POW but is imprisoned by prejudice of the white community.

Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* presents the struggle of a nameless narrator who, after experiencing various traumas because of his race, comes to the awareness that being black in a white society makes one invisible, or a nonentity.

Published in 1969, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first of Maya Angelou's many autobiographies and chronicles her experiences living with her grandmother in rural Stamps, Arkansas, being shuffled between her parents, being raped by her mother's boyfriend, and eventually giving birth as a teenager to her own son.

Further Study

Carolyn C Denard, "Tom Morrison,"' in *Modern American Women Writers,* edited by Elaine Showalter, Lea Baechler, and A Walton Litz, Macmillan, 1993, pp. 209-27.

Denard's essay contains thorough treatment of each of Morrison's novels as well as biographical information.

Anne Koenen, "The One Out of Sequence,"' in *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture,* edited by Gunter H. Lenz, Campus Verlag, 1984, pp 207-21.

In her interview with Koenen, Morrison comments on motherhood, romantic love, her frustration at having to explain the black life she writes about for the benefit of whites, and the Black liberation movement of the 60s

Jane Kuenz, *"The Bluest Eye:* Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity," *African American Re view,* Vol. 27, no. 3, fall, 1993, pp. 421-32.

Study of the ways in which participation in mainstream culture can cause "an abdication of self' by members of minorities.

Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems, *Toni Morrison,* Twayne, 1990.

An excellent introduction for student to the work of Morrison; includes an extensive bibliography.

Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality:* 1954, 1992, Noonday, 1993.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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