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Modern American Novel : Case Study

Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye

Full Summary of the Novel

Nine-year-old Claudia and ten-year-old Frieda MacTeer live in Lorain, Ohio, with their parents. It is the end of the Great Depression, and the girls’ parents are more concerned with making ends meet than with lavishing attention upon their daughters, but there is an undercurrent of love and stability in their home. The MacTeers take in a boarder, Henry Washington, and also a young girl named Pecola. Pecola’s father has tried to burn down his family’s house, and Claudia and Frieda feel sorry for her. Pecola loves Shirley Temple, believing that whiteness is beautiful and that she is ugly.

Pecola moves back in with her family, and her life is difficult. Her father drinks, her mother is distant, and the two of them often beat one another. Her brother, Sammy, frequently runs away. Pecola believes that if she had blue eyes, she would be loved and her life would be transformed. Meanwhile, she continually receives confirmation of her own sense of ugliness—the grocer looks right through her when she buys candy, boys make fun of her, and a light-skinned girl, Maureen, who temporarily befriends her makes fun of her too. She is wrongly blamed for killing a boy’s cat and is called a “nasty little black bitch” by his mother.

We learn that Pecola’s parents have both had difficult lives. Pauline, her mother, has a lame foot and has always felt isolated. She loses herself in movies, which reaffirm her belief that she is ugly and that romantic love is reserved for the beautiful. She encourages her husband’s violent behavior in order to reinforce her own role as a martyr. She feels most alive when she is at work, cleaning a white woman’s home. She loves this home and despises her own. Cholly, Pecola’s father, was abandoned by his parents and raised by his great aunt, who died when he was a young teenager. He was humiliated by two white men who found him having sex for the first time and made him continue while they watched. He ran away to find his father but was rebuffed

by him. By the time he met Pauline, he was a wild and rootless man. He feels trapped in his marriage and has lost interest in life.

Cholly returns home one day, finds Pecola washing dishes, and rapes her. When Pecola's mother finds her unconscious on the floor, she disbelieves Pecola's story and beats her. Pecola goes to Soaphead Church, a sham mystic, and asks him for blue eyes. Instead of helping her, he uses her to kill a dog he dislikes.

Claudia and Frieda find out that Pecola has been impregnated by her father, and unlike the rest of the neighborhood, they want the baby to live. They sacrifice the money they have been saving for a bicycle and plant marigold seeds. They believe that if the flowers live, so will Pecola's baby. The flowers refuse to bloom, and Pecola's baby dies when it is born prematurely. Cholly, who rapes Pecola a second time and then runs away, dies in a workhouse. Pecola goes mad, believing that her cherished wish has been fulfilled and that she has the bluest eyes.

Character List

Pecola Breedlove

The protagonist of the novel, an eleven-year-old Black girl who believes that she is ugly and that having blue eyes would make her beautiful. Sensitive and delicate, she passively suffers the abuse of her mother, father, and classmates. She is lonely and imaginative.

In-depth characterization of Pecola Breedlove

Pecola is the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye,* but despite this central role she is passive and remains a mysterious character. Morrison explains in her novel's afterword that she purposely tells Pecola's story from other points of view to keep Pecola's dignity and, to some extent, her mystery intact. She wishes to prevent us from labeling Pecola or prematurely believing that we understand her. Pecola is a fragile and delicate child when the novel begins, and by the novel's close, she has been almost completely destroyed by violence. At the beginning of the novel, two desires form the basis of her

emotional life: first, she wants to learn how to get people to love her; second, when forced to witness her parents' brutal fights, she simply wants to disappear. Neither wish is granted, and Pecola is forced further and further into her fantasy world, which is her only defense against the pain of her existence. She believes that being granted the blue eyes that she wishes for would change both how others see her and what she is forced to see. At the novel's end, she delusively believes that her wish has been granted, but only at the cost of her sanity. Pecola's fate is a fate worse than death because she is not allowed any release from her world—she simply moves to "the edge of town, where you can see her even now."

Pecola is also a symbol of the Black community's self-hatred and belief in its own ugliness. Others in the community, including her mother, father, and Geraldine, act out their own self-hatred by expressing hatred toward her. At the end of the novel, we are told that Pecola has been a scapegoat for the entire community. Her ugliness has made them feel beautiful, her suffering has made them feel comparatively lucky, and her silence has given them the opportunity for speaking. But because she continues to live after she has lost her mind, Pecola's aimless wandering at the edge of town haunts the community, reminding them of the ugliness and hatred that they have tried to repress. She becomes a reminder of human cruelty and an emblem of human suffering.

Claudia MacTeer

The narrator of parts of the novel. An independent and strong-minded nine-year-old, Claudia is a fighter and rebels against adults' tyranny over children and against the Black community's idealization of white beauty standards. She has not yet learned the self-hatred that plagues her peers.

Cholly Breedlove

Pecola's father, who is impulsive and violent—free, but in a dangerous way. Having suffered early humiliations, he takes out his frustration on the women in his life. He is capable of both tenderness and rage, but as the story unfolds, rage increasingly dominates.

Pauline (Polly) Breedlove

Pecola's mother, who believes that she is ugly; this belief has made her lonely and cold. She has a deformed foot and sees herself as the martyr of a

terrible marriage. She finds meaning not in her own family but in romantic movies and in her work caring for a well-to-do white family.

Frieda MacTeer
Claudia's ten-year-old sister, who shares Claudia's independence and stubbornness. Because she is closer to adolescence, Frieda is more vulnerable to her community's equation of whiteness with beauty. Frieda is more knowledgeable about the adult world and sometimes braver than Claudia.

Mrs. MacTeer
Claudia's mother, an authoritarian and sometimes callous woman who nonetheless steadfastly loves and protects her children. She is given to fussing aloud and to singing the blues.

Mr. MacTeer
Claudia's father, who works hard to keep the family fed and clothed. He is fiercely protective of his daughters.

Henry Washington
The MacTeers' boarder, who has a reputation for being a steady worker and a quiet man. Middle-aged, he has never married and has a lecherous side.

Sammy Breedlove
Pecola's fourteen-year-old brother, who copes with his family's problems by running away from home. His active response contrasts with Pecola's passivity.

China, Poland, Miss Marie
The local prostitues, Miss Marie (also known as the Maginot Line) is fat and affectionate, China is skinny and sarcastic, and Poland is quiet. They live above the Breedlove apartment and befriend Pecola.

Mr. Yacobowski
The local grocer, a middle-aged white immigrant. He has a gruff manner toward little Black girls.

Rosemary Villanucci
A white, comparatively wealthy girl who lives next door to the MacTeers. She makes fun of Claudia and Frieda and tries to get them into trouble, and they sometimes beat her up.

Maureen Peal
A light-skinned, wealthy Black girl who is new at the local school. She accepts everyone else's assumption that she is superior and is capable of both generosity and cruelty.

Geraldine
A middle-class Black woman who, though she keeps house flawlessly and diligently cares for the physical appearances of herself and her family (including her husband, Louis, and her son, Junior), is essentially cold. She feels real affection only for her cat.

Junior
Geraldine's son, who, in the absence of genuine affection from his mother, becomes cruel and sadistic. He tortures the family cat and harasses children who come to the nearby playground.

Soaphead Church
Born Elihue Micah Whitcomb, he is a light-skinned West Indian misanthrope and self-declared "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams." He hates all kinds of human touch, with the exception of the bodies of young girls. He is a religious hypocrite.

Aunt Jimmy
The elderly woman who raises Cholly. She is affectionate but physically in decay.

Samson Fuller
Cholly's father, who abandoned Cholly's mother when she got pregnant. He lives in Macon, Georgia, and is short, balding, and mean.

Blue Jack
A co-worker and friend of Cholly's during his boyhood. He is a kind man and excellent storyteller.

M'Dear
A quiet, elderly woman who serves as a doctor in the community where Cholly grows up. She is tall and impressive, and she carries a hickory stick.

Darlene
The first girl that Cholly likes. She is pretty, playful and affectionate.

Themes

Whiteness as the Standard of Beauty
The Bluest Eye provides an extended depiction of the ways in which internalized white beauty standards deform the lives of Black girls and women. Implicit messages that whiteness is superior are everywhere, including the white baby doll given to Claudia, the idealization of Shirley Temple, the consensus that light-skinned Maureen is cuter than the other Black girls, the idealization of white beauty in the movies, and Pauline Breedlove's preference for the little white girl she works for over her daughter. Adult women, having learned to hate the Blackness of their own bodies, take this hatred out on their children—Mrs. Breedlove shares the conviction that Pecola is ugly, and lighter-skinned Geraldine curses Pecola's Blackness. Claudia remains free from this worship of whiteness, imagining Pecola's unborn baby as beautiful in its Blackness. But it is hinted that once Claudia reaches adolescence, she too will learn to hate herself, as if racial self-loathing were a necessary part of maturation.
The person who suffers most from white beauty standards is, of course, Pecola. She connects beauty with being loved and believes that if she possesses blue eyes, the cruelty in her life will be replaced by affection and respect. This hopeless desire leads ultimately to madness, suggesting that the fulfillment of the wish for white beauty may be even more tragic than the wish impulse itself.

Seeing versus Being Seen

Pecola's desire for blue eyes, while highly unrealistic, is based on one correct insight into her world: she believes that the cruelty she witnesses and experiences is connected to how she is seen. If she had beautiful blue eyes, Pecola imagines, people would not want to do ugly things in front of her or to her. The accuracy of this insight is affirmed by her experience of being teased by the boys—when Maureen comes to her rescue, it seems that they no longer want to behave badly under Maureen's attractive gaze. In a more basic sense, Pecola and her family are mistreated in part because they happen to have black skin. By wishing for blue eyes rather than lighter skin, Pecola indicates that she wishes to see things differently as much as she wishes to be seen differently. She can only receive this wish, in effect, by blinding herself. Pecola is then able to see herself as beautiful, but only at the cost of her ability to see accurately both herself and the world around her. The connection between how one is seen and what one sees has a uniquely tragic outcome for her.

The Power of Stories

The Bluest Eye is not one story, but multiple, sometimes contradictory, interlocking stories. Characters tell stories to make sense of their lives, and these stories have tremendous power for both good and evil. Claudia's stories, in particular, stand out for their affirmative power. First and foremost, she tells Pecola's story, and though she questions the accuracy and meaning of her version, to some degree her attention and care redeem the ugliness of Pecola's life. Furthermore, when the adults describe Pecola's pregnancy and hope that the baby dies, Claudia and Frieda attempt to rewrite this story as a hopeful one, casting themselves as saviors. Finally, Claudia resists the premise of white superiority, writing her own story about the beauty of Blackness. Stories by other characters are often destructive to themselves and others. The story Pauline Breedlove tells herself about her own ugliness reinforces her self-hatred, and the story she tells herself about her own martyrdom reinforces her cruelty toward her family. Soaphead Church's personal narratives about his good intentions and his special relationship with God are pure hypocrisy. Stories are as likely to distort the truth as they are to reveal it. While Morrison apparently believes that stories can be redeeming, she is no blind optimist and refuses to let us rest comfortably in any one version of what happens.

Sexual Initiation and Abuse

To a large degree, *The Bluest Eye* is about both the pleasures and the perils of sexual initiation. Early in the novel, Pecola has her first menstrual period, and toward the novel's end she has her first sexual experience, which is violent. Frieda knows about and anticipates menstruating, and she is initiated into sexual experience when she is fondled by Henry Washington. We are told the story of Cholly's first sexual experience, which ends when two white men force him to finish having sex while they watch. The fact that all of these experiences are humiliating and hurtful indicates that sexual coming-of-age is fraught with peril, especially in an abusive environment.

In the novel, parents carry much of the blame for their children's often traumatic sexual coming-of-age. The most blatant case is Cholly's rape of his own daughter, Pecola, which is, in a sense, a repetition of the sexual humiliation Cholly experienced under the gaze of two racist whites. Frieda's experience is less painful than Pecola's because her parents immediately come to her rescue, playing the appropriate protector and underlining, by way of contrast, the extent of Cholly's crime against his daughter. But Frieda is not given information that lets her understand what has happened to her. Instead, she lives with a vague fear of being "ruined" like the local prostitutes. The prevalence of sexual violence in the novel suggests that racism is not the only thing that distorts Black girlhoods. There is also a pervasive assumption that women's bodies are available for abuse. The refusal on the part of parents to teach their girls about sexuality makes the girls' transition into sexual maturity difficult.

Satisfying Appetites versus Suppressing Them

A number of characters in *The Bluest Eye* define their lives through a denial of their bodily needs. Geraldine prefers cleanliness and order to the messiness of sex, and she is emotionally frigid as a result. Similarly, Pauline prefers cleaning and organizing the home of her white employers to expressing physical affection toward her family. Soaphead Church finds physicality distasteful, and this peculiarity leads to his preference for objects over humans and to his perverse attraction to little girls. In contrast, when characters experience happiness, it is generally in viscerally physical terms. Claudia prefers to have her senses indulged by wonderful scents, sounds, and tastes than to be given a hard white doll. Cholly's greatest moments of

happinesses are eating the best part of a watermelon and touching a girl for the first time. Pauline's happiest memory is of sexual fulfillment with her husband. The novel suggests that, no matter how messy and sometimes violent human desire is, it is also the source of happiness: denial of the body begets hatred and violence, not redemption.

Symbols

The House

The novel begins with a sentence from a Dick-and-Jane narrative: "Here is the house." Homes not only indicate socioeconomic status in this novel, but they also symbolize the emotional situations and values of the characters who inhabit them. The Breedlove apartment is miserable and decrepit, suffering from Mrs. Breedlove's preference for her employer's home over her own and symbolizing the misery of the Breedlove family. The MacTeer house is drafty and dark, but it is carefully tended by Mrs. MacTeer and, according to Claudia, filled with love, symbolizing that family's comparative cohesion.

Bluest Eye(s)

To Pecola, blue eyes symbolize the beauty and happiness that she associates with the white, middle-class world. They also come to symbolize her own blindness, for she gains blue eyes only at the cost of her sanity. The "bluest" eye could also mean the saddest eye. Furthermore, *eye* puns on *I,* in the sense that the novel's title uses the singular form of the noun (instead of *The Bluest Eyes*) to express many of the characters' sad isolation.

The Marigolds

Claudia and Frieda associate marigolds with the safety and well-being of Pecola's baby. Their ceremonial offering of money and the remaining unsold marigold seeds represents an honest sacrifice on their part. They believe that if the marigolds they have planted grow, then Pecola's baby will be all right. More generally, marigolds represent the constant renewal of nature. In Pecola's case, this cycle of renewal is perverted by her father's rape of her.

Topics

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The Bluest Eye uses multiple narrators, including Claudia as a child, Claudia as an adult, and an omniscient narrator. Which narrative point of view do you think is most central to the novel and why?

A case can be made for the centrality of any of the three narrators listed above. The perspective of the adult Claudia frames the novel—the second section of the prologue and the novel's last chapter are told from her point of view. These opening and closing sections say the most about what Pecola's story means, and our efforts to make sense of the story therefore depend upon and parallel the adult Claudia's efforts. But Claudia's childlike perspective is also crucial. She is similar to Pecola in age and social status, and therefore possesses special insight into the nature and meaning of Pecola's suffering. At the same time, she is comparatively more confident and secure than Pecola, so she can articulate things that Pecola cannot. The omniscient narrator is also central to the telling of the story, because she provides information about Cholly's and Pauline's pasts, which make them more sympathetic and give the novel its broader scope. Without the character backgrounds provided by this omniscient perspective, Pecola's tragedy might be too senseless for the novel to hold together.

Who do you think is the most sympathetic character in the novel and why?

Morrison designs to make us sympathize with even the most violent and hurtful characters, which means that this question has many possible answers. Pecola is the most obvious candidate for our sympathy, because she undergoes a shocking amount of abuse. She is forced to witness her parents' violent fights, she is mocked or ignored by her classmates, she is tormented by Junior, she is raped by her father, and she is used by Soaphead Church. But to some degree, Pecola remains a shadowy, mysterious character—we are not given as much insight into how she thinks and feels as we are into other characters, who may therefore receive the greater share of our sympathy. Both of Pecola's parents are sympathetic because the narrator goes to great lengths to explain how they have become the kind of people they are. Pauline's story is partially narrated by Pauline herself, which makes her more sympathetic because we are given a vivid glimpse into the pleasure and suffering of her life. Although Cholly does not narrate any part of his story, he endures so much hardship—starting from the moment he is born

and discarded by the train tracks—that we cannot help but feel sympathy for him. Claudia is yet another candidate for the most sympathetic character, simply because we experience so much of the story from her point of view and she is the one who helps us makes sense of it all.

***The Bluest Eye* is a novel about racism, and yet there are relatively few instances of the direct oppression of black people by white people in the book. Explain how racism functions in the story.**

Unlike in which an African-American is persecuted by whites simply on the basis of skin color, presents a more complicated portrayal of racism. The characters do experience direct oppression, but more routinely they are subject to an internalized set of values that creates its own cycle of victimization within families and the neighborhood. The Black community in the novel has accepted white standards of beauty, judging Maureen's light skin to be attractive and Pecola's dark skin to be ugly. Claudia can sense the destructiveness of this idea and rebels against it when she destroys her white doll and imagines Pecola's unborn baby as beautiful. Racism also affects the characters of the novel in other indirect ways. The general sense of precariousness of the Black community during the Great Depression, in comparison with the relative affluence of the whites in the novel, reminds us of the link between race and class. More directly, the sexual violation of Pecola is connected to the sexual violation of Cholly by whites who view his loss of virginity as entertainment.

The Bluest EyeToni Morrison and The Bluest Eye Background

Toni Morrison Biography

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931. She was a Nobel Prize-winning novelist most famous for her exploration of the Black experience, particularly the Black female experience. She grew up in the Midwest and developed a deep love of storytelling and folklore from a young age. She credited her family and upbringing for her love and appreciation of Black culture. She received her undergraduate degree from

Howard University in 1953 and her master's degree from Cornell University in 1955, completing a thesis on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Afterward, she taught at Texas Southern University and then at Howard, in Washington, D.C., where she met Harold Morrison, an architect from Jamaica. They were married from 1958 to 1964, and the couple had two sons. Afer the couple split up and the birth of her second son, Morrison moved to New York and became an editor at Random House, specializing in Black fiction. During this difficult and somewhat lonely time, she began working on her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* which was published in 1970.

Morrison is known for her deft examination of the Black experience. She often covered themes of injustice, oppression, racism, and identity with her captivating, poetic prose. Morrison's body of work is extensive, including ten novels, seven works of nonfiction, two plays, and three children's stories. *The Bluest Eye* was followed by *Sula* in 1973, which secured her a nomination for the National Book Award. In 1977, Morrison won the National Book Critics Circle Award for her book *Song of Solomon.* Her most well-known and perhaps best work, *Beloved,* appeared in 1987 and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. That novel, considered by many to be her best, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. In 1993. She then became the first African American woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, which was the same year that *Beloved* was adapted into a film starring Oprah Winfrey. Other works by Morrison include *Tar Baby* (1981), her only short story, "Recitatif" (1983), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998).

Morrison was the chair of the Humanities Department at Princeton University from 1989 until her retirement in 2006. She was a gifted essayist and sought-after speaker. Among her many accolades, Morrison was granted an honorary degree from Oxford University in 2005, and she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama in 2012. Morrison passed away in 2019 due to complications from pneumonia in New York City at the age of 88.

Background on *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye contains a number of autobiographical elements. It is set in the town where Morrison grew up, and it is told from the point of view of a nine-year-old, the age Morrison would have been the year the novel takes place (). Like the MacTeer family, Morrison's family struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression. Morrison grew up listening to her mother

singing and her grandfather playing the violin, just as Claudia does. In the novel's afterword, Morrison explains that the story developed out of a conversation she had had in elementary school with a little girl, who longed for blue eyes. She was still thinking about this conversation in the s, when the Black is Beautiful movement was working to reclaim Black-American beauty, and she began her first novel.

While its historical context is clear, the literary context of *The Bluest Eye* is more complex. Faulkner and Woolf, whose work Morrison knew well, influenced her style. She uses the modernist techniques of stream-of-consciousness, multiple perspectives, and deliberate fragmentation. But Morrison understands her work more fundamentally as part of a Black cultural tradition and strives to create a distinctively Black literature. Her prose is infused with Black musical traditions such as the spirituals, gospel, jazz and the blues. She writes in a Black vernacular, full of turns of phrase and figures of speech unique to the community in which she grew up, with the hope that if she is true to her own particular experience, it will be universally meaningful. In this way, she attempts to create what she calls a "race-specific yet race-free prose."

In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye,* Morrison explains her goal in writing the novel. She wants to make a statement about the damage that internalized racism can do to the most vulnerable member of a community—a young girl. At the same time, she does not want to dehumanize the people who wound this girl, because that would simply repeat their mistake. Also, she wants to protect this girl from "the weight of the novel's inquiry," and thus decides to tell the story from multiple perspectives. In this way, as she puts it, she "shape[s] a silence while breaking it," keeping the girl's dignity intact.