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Period 2

American Literature

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### Deceived Eyes Fail to Guard the Heart

What is racism and discrimination? It is the community thinking lower of someone else because of a certain feature. Toni Morrison experienced much discrimination and racism in her lifetime. Toni Morrison lived in an era of discrimination and grew up in a poor family which distrusted whites; therefore, she wrote *The Bluest Eye*, which includes a poor and abusive household setting, negligent parents with their own history of brokenness, a racist community, the theme of rejection by the surrounding people, and the want to be normal. The vision of normal in this story is arguably diluted by a sense of outer beauty portrayed by blue eyes. This kind of philosophy is exemplified by the Bible verse Proverbs 23:7. “As one thinks in his heart so is he.”

Toni Morrison and her parents were heavily influenced by the Depression because they lived through the times. The Great Depression started in “October 1929, and the world entrapped millions of its people into poverty and despair” (Temin). Although she was only ten years old when it ended, her parents had a rough time. During the Depression, her parents struggled to get jobs. Like many people in America, she lived a deprived childhood, not having enough money to buy gifts, toys, and struggled to find food. Her family also wasn't doing well even before the Depression. Like most farmers they had an “especially hard time because they weren't doing that well in the twenties,” (Temin). During World War I, many farmers were well off because they

were selling everything they could farm for a high price because there were lots of rations and many people were drafted for the war. However, when World War I ended, the farmers could not sell much, and therefore they lost a lot of money during the twenties. This means that they were hit down even more by the depression. The farmers in the Central United States also did badly during the Dust Bowl. The Dust Bowl started out in “1935 and America was hit with a dust storm which affected farmers in the mid-US because they couldn't grow crops,” (Keese). It was hard for the farmers to grow crops because all the dust storms would damage the crops. They really only had five years to recover from the Depression and the farmers had always been doing poorly.

The changes in the civil rights movement and the role of women had affected Toni Morrison significantly. The draft had called for “fifteen million men to answer the call to the war and the war increased the production of goods which means that it created a large demand of workers and women filled those jobs,” (Hendrickson). Before World War II most men had jobs and many women were housewives. During the war many men were enlisted to the military and there was more demand for goods and so women had to take over the jobs. In 1954 the Civil Rights Movement started, “the Civil Rights Movement is about giving rights back to the blacks,” (Hendrickson). Before the movement, the blacks were treated unfairly especially in the south and there were separations of the whites and blacks out of everything, the military, schools, and drinking fountains. The movement started with a “protest which started off with a bus boycott about not giving up their seats to whites and Martin Luther King Jr led the movement,” (Keese). The protest eventually grew over time, and it slowly changed the rights of blacks and the racism toward them.

World War II has also affected the author during her life. It started “when the US was enraged at the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack and declared war on Japan.” (Spencer). It angered Americans because Japan attacked the US without any warning even though they promised to give a thirty-minute warning. This caused the Americans to be unprepared and therefore lost many ships and planes. The Cold War also affected Toni Morrison in her life. After World War II, when Germany was defeated, “Russia took control of Eastern Europe when the Soviets installed puppet governments in Poland and Romania,” (Spencer). America was upset because they did not want a new war, but a new conflict was stirring. America did not want to deal with another war, so they let them be. However the United States and the Soviets became very tense when, “the US and the Soviets threatened each other with nukes and Americans were scared of communism spreading to their country,” (Keese). America and the Soviets did not fight each other, if they did, they destroyed the planet with their nuclear weapons. During that period the whole world was scared of a nuclear war emerging.

Toni Morrison lived with a poor, struggling family. Her parents had an especially hard time supporting the family, “Her parents were willing to take on excusivating and sometimes laborious work,” (Heinze). Both parents found it hard to find jobs while supporting their family. Since her parents were away most of the time she didn't get to see them as much. Toni Morrison's grandparents also suffered from racism and debt, “her grandparents decided to travel north to escape from the endless debt of sharecropping and the constant racism in 1912,” (Heinze). Before they moved out, they were working in a plantation and were receiving just enough money to live off of, which meant that they would be working for the rest of their lives. They were always being mistreated by others. Toni Morison's parents grew up to slowly dislike the whites and eventually completely distrust them. “Their many experiences with racism formed

their respective ideas of white people. Morrison's father was a racist against whites," (Heinze). This affected Morrison because she was always encouraged by her parents to dislike whites. However, she didn't think the same way as her parents even though she was treated the same way.

Morrison excelled in reading, literature, and in writing even as a child. Her family encouraged her by "reading her ghost stories. Her grandmother used a dream teller and she was the only person who knew how to read in first grade." (Blake). This really inspired her to become an author and it helped her develop the skills to write many famous books. She was also inspired by other books, "During her childhood, she was encouraged to read novels from the library," (de Weever). Her passion was to read and write which is needed to become a great writer. Toni Morrison made her career as a writer, "Morrison attended Howard University, and acquired a degree in English. In 1955, Morrison became an English teacher at Texas Southern University," (Gale Literature: Contemporary Authors). Toni Morrison's teachings gave her many perspectives throughout her career. It definitely gave her an edge on writing new books.

Toni Morrison lived in a rural area, "Morrison was born with the name, Chloe Anthony Wofford, in Lorain, Ohio, a small industrial town near the shores of Lake Erie," (Gale Literature: Contemporary Authors). During this time she decided to change her name to Toni Morrison and since she lived in a rural area where she likely got to know all the people there. Morrison had a small family; she is "close in age to her sister, Lois, and the two formed a bond. Morrison joined the Catholic Church when she was twelve," (Heinze). Toni Morrison was not alone during her childhood, she had a sibling. Since her parents were Catholic she was disciplined to be a good kid and to not cause trouble. During her life Toni Morrison got lots of work experience other than teaching, "Morrison acquired money by cleaning homes because many jobs were not

available at the time. The job gave her a prospect on black-white relations,” (Gale Literature: Contemporary Authors). Toni Morrison worked for many people and many of them were racist. This especially helped give her writing an edge because most of her novels and poems promoted the Civil Rights Movement.

The setting of *The Bluest Eye* is a racist community where whites discriminate against blacks, “his mother didn’t like him to play around with blacks. She had explained to him the distinction between colored people and whites,” (Als). Since the main character Pecola and her family are black they are treated differently than whites. For example, whites and blacks are always separated, some of these separations are schools, drinking fountains, and funerals but most of the time whites get the better side. In the story, the blacks have to live with separation and racism. The Breedloves family was very poor. “The Breedloves lived in a storefront, they lived there because the family was black and poor,” (Als). The Breedloves were so impoverished that they could not afford a regular apartment, they had to live in a storefront which is a room above a store.

Many of the characters in *The Bluest Eye* don't like Pecola, “who infringe Pecola in some way or another,” (Blake). Some examples of this are when Pecola’s mother left her family, when her father raped her (while he was intoxicated thinking Pecola was his wife) impregnating her and when her classmates who reject her and laugh at her. Lastly, the community rejected and ignored her. Pecola is the main character in *The Bluest Eye*, but she doesn't get a good ending, instead, she gets a horrific ending where she wants to be normal (in her diluted mind) and because of it she wants to have the bluest eye thinking this would enable her to escape her persecution, “When we meet Pecola, she is eleven years old but already has lots of grief,”

(Blake). Pecola doesn't have a healthy sense of self, and she thinks very lowly of herself. She thinks to have worth she must possess Blue Eyes.

There are many themes in *The Bluest Eye*, for example, that whiteness is superior to a dark complexion, as depicted by the movies of the era, Shirley Temple was idealised for her blue eyes. Pecola's mother preferred the white little girls she worked for rather than her own daughter, whom she thought was ugly. Pecola's desire to want the Bluest eyes thinking the cruel life she has had to endure would be replaced by love and honor. The want for being normal mixed with her parent's rejection and lastly, the community treating her badly, and unfairly. For Pecola, "her desire for the bluest eyes is because of Pecola's dissatisfaction for who she is, with her world, and of her want for something greater," (de Weever). Her want for Blue Eyes made her go insane and thinks that she has blue eyes. The first example that she wanted blue eyes was when she prayed to God about it every day. Another reason she wanted blue eyes is that in her mind she thought that the bluest eye is the most beautiful thing in the world, and it would solve all her suffering and problems. Another theme is the rejection of both of her parents for his dad who raped her daughter, "which, at twelve years old, she has no option to provide for herself," (Booklist). Her dad didn't love her because it is a horrible thing to do. The dad had to take care of her because she is a minor, and it is the law that the parents have to take care of her, which means she would live on her own when she turned eighteen. As for her mom, she just left the whole family. She didn't care about her daughter, if anything happened to Pecola there would be no consequences for the mom. The last theme is the racism and discrimination, "The Bluest Eye amplifies an extreme form of the shame-anxiety and shame-vulnerability of African Americans in America," (Als). Throughout the book Pecola is judged differently just because she is black, has been raped by her father and is pregnant. Racism and discrimination were some of the

igniting causes to her dysfunctional family that caused her to go insane thinking that she has blue eyes, because she was so hurt she could only live with herself by others standards set before her. Because of this, she is not able to make many friends and many people made fun of her.

Racism, discrimination, wanting, poverty, rejection, and sexism are some of what Pelican experienced in her life becoming mad about having the Bluest Eyes. Just as in real life, the author also experienced many of those feelings in her life as she lived through the Depression and the Dust Bowl. However, she takes the bad in her life and writes poems and books about those experiences, hoping to spark a change. She also writes in order to raise awareness about the blacks and women's experiences as well as for her own life.

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