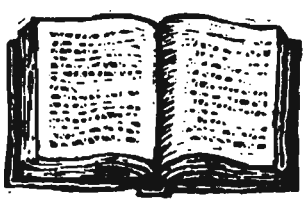
The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison

1970



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 unachieveable 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

Toni Morrison

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 on 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 III: 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 IV: 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.

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 daugh-

Media 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.

ter: 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 obsession 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 Marie

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 Marie 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 distant 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-dog-tooth-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 de-

cline 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."

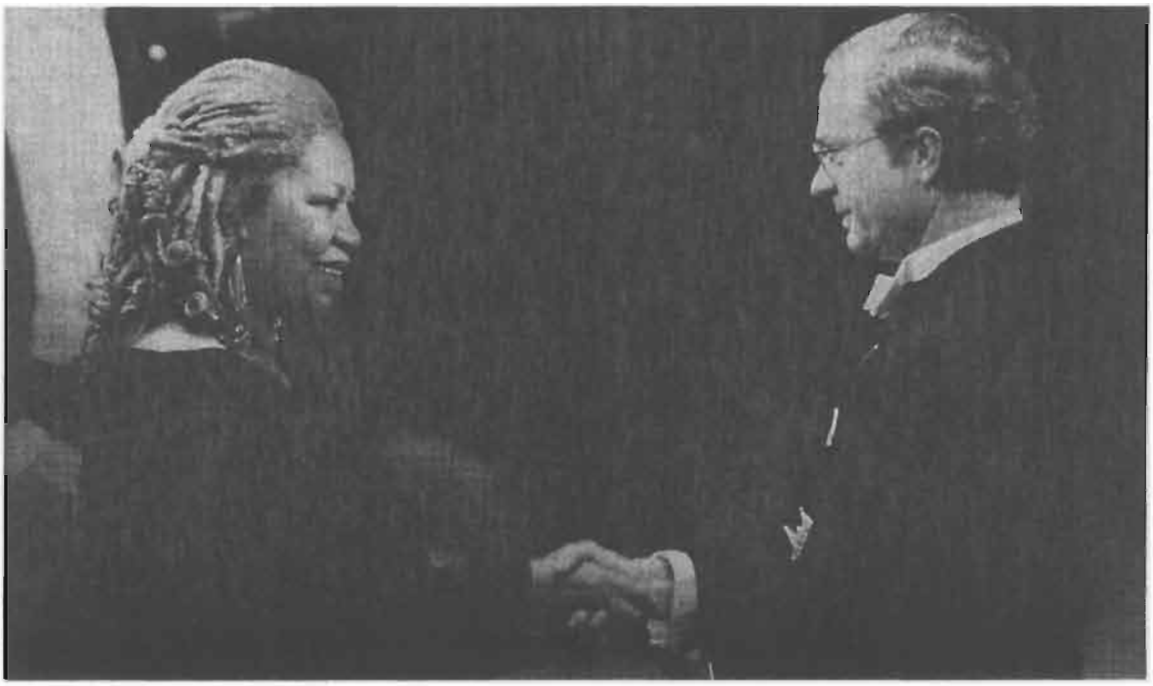
Coming of Age

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.

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.

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.



Toni Morrison accepting the Nobel Prize, 1993.

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 he 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 scorn 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 every-

one 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.

Shirley Temple, the movie icon of childhood from the 1930s and 1940s, curtseys.

Historical Context

Civil Rights and Race Relations

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

Compare & 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 acquited four police officers of all but one charge in the beating of black motorist Rodney King.

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 *Freedomways,* 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

Diane Henningfeld

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.*

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. Set in Morrison's home-

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 non-entity.
- 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.

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."

Toni 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 "normative" 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 "SEETHECATITGOESMEOW MEOW." 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 "SEEFATHERHEISBIGANSTRONG 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 Henningfeld, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale 1997.

Dorothy H. Lee

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

Source: Dorothy H. Lee, "The Quest for Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison," in *Black Women Writers (1959–1980): A Critical Evaluation,* edited by Mari Evans, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984, pp. 346–60.

Jacqueline de Weever

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.