

The Bluest Eye



by Toni Morrison

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Characters

Except for possibly the Frasier family and the archetypal Dick and Jane, all the characters of *The Bluest Eye* are both universal — that is, representative — and individual. Morrison successfully infuses the characters with personal qualities that lead us to empathize with them, as well as with universal meaning. For the most part they are victims, of the European–American community's standards of beauty and of an economic system that exploits minorities. Many also are caught up in a cycle of victimization, like Geraldine, who in her attempt to protect her son from becoming the poor African–American she despises, alienates him both from the culture she despises and the one to which she aspires.

Pecola is everyone's victim, so hers is the scapegoat's role. Cholly passes on his frustration as a husband, father, wage-earner to her in the form of sexual aggression; Pauline, Geraldine, and Junior despise her as an emblem of a culture they wish to escape. Soaphead and Junior take advantage of her innocence for their own sick agendas. Even Claudia, despite many acts of friendship and love, realizes that she and her sister used Pecola to compensate for their own lack of self-esteem. Thus the vast majority of the characters are caught in a vicious circle of victimization; unable to cope successfully with their own lack of power in the culture, they

find someone weaker than themselves upon whom they can prey. Unfortunately for people like Pecola, some are too weak or too good to pass on the heritage of suffering. Such people become recipients of wrath and frustrations many times removed and compounded.

Pecola finds acceptance for who she is, without judgment of her ugliness, uncleanliness, or poverty in only one place in the novel. Not in the church, the home, the schools — all these institutions reinforce her sense of unworthiness. Only in a brothel does she find acceptance. There three whores, already stigmatized by the community as worthless persons, give the child something approximating nurturing love. And even that is compromised, in part because Marie, China, and Poland are themselves alienated victims whose freedom is much like that Morrison attributes to Cholly — that of someone who has nothing to lose. Whores traffic in love and illusion, and the women, with probably the best of intentions, contribute to Pecola's association of affection with objects. As she later believes she has blue eyes, she tells Claudia the whores give her expensive clothes, jewelry, and money; she even brags that each will help Pecola escape — one will take her to Chicago, another to Cleveland.

Thus even the only free individuals of *The Bluest Eye*, the prostitutes, contribute to Pecola's illusion and in a way victimize her while trying to help her. None of the characters successfully gives unqualified love. None can really like Pecola on her own terms, and many characters compensate for their own low self-esteem by victimizing someone weaker than they.

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Social Concerns

In some ways the synergy between Morrison and the emerging concerns of the times about which she writes were foreshadowed by her first, and in some circles her most famous, novel. The social issues of *The Bluest Eye* lie centrally with the impact certain cultural icons have on the consciousness of minorities. African-Americans in this novel are taught to think of themselves as ugly or inferior because of the signs and ideals the culture imposes on them, a position the novel's narrator calls into question rhetorically by explaining the principal family's living in an abandoned store: "They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they *believed they were* ugly" (italics added). The heroine, Pecola Breedlove, is virtually destroyed by her own and her family's self-loathing because they cannot conform with the standards of beauty white America cherishes. As the title suggests, Pecola feels inferior because she lacks aesthetic properties white culture endorses; she comes to feel that only by having blue eyes can she complete her self. After many violent assaults on her self-esteem, most pointedly snubs by schoolmates, her mother's clear preference for the white daughter of the family for whom she works, and a rape by her drunken father (a perverse effort to express love that results in pregnancy), Pecola, barely into her teens, succumbs to madness and the illusion that God gave her the bluest eyes possible to compensate for her absolute lack of self-esteem and friends. The novel ends with a painful conversation between Pecola and an imaginary friend discussing her extraordinary blue eyes.

All the members of Pecola's family and community have been impressed by racial stereotyping. Her father Cholly was sadistically humiliated by Southern whites in an adolescent sexual episode, and with this loss of autonomy his sense of his virility or manhood was diminished, a pattern that continues as he has trouble keeping a job and supporting his family in an economic environment in which African-Americans are the last hired and the first fired — an issue Morrison takes up more directly in *Sula*. Cholly's moral degeneration proceeds through excessive drinking, spousal abuse, and finally incest before he enacts one of white America's fundamental racial stereotypes, the absent African-American father. Whether Morrison intends Cholly's mistreatment of his family to be explained by his own terrible adolescent experience at the hands of

whites is ambiguous; in two flashbacks to their courtship Pauline recalls Cholly as a vibrant youth who subsequently degenerated into a moral and paternal failure, but in the reconstruction of Cholly's past the omniscient narrator portrays a series of defeats that culminate in a desperate existential freedom: "Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose."

More unambiguously, Pauline has deteriorated, with her northward migration, from a person at home in nature to a drudge who endures a painful marriage while finding solace in the white family for whom she works and compensating for her frustration as wife and mother by indulging in self-righteous religious indignation. In one of the novel's most painful and eloquent scenes, Pecola, accompanied by two friends, visits Pauline at work and accidentally spills a hot baked dish to the floor, painfully burning herself. Because the Fosters' white daughter is distressed, Pauline abuses Pecola physically and verbally, then turns to comfort her employer's child — reinforcing her and Pecola's sense of her ugliness and reasserting Morrison's theme concerning the distortion of basic relationships like maternal concern when clouded by false standards of beauty and loyalty.

Pauline is also influenced toward racial self-loathing by more broadly based cultural symbols. She finds in the Fosters' luxurious home a refuge from her own wretched life in a converted storefront and commits herself to order and elegance at work while neglecting her home. Pecola's friend Claudia, who narrates the episode in which Pauline expresses her preference for her employer's daughter, comments that at work Pauline "looked nicer than I had ever seen her, in her white uniform . . . "

More importantly to the novel's themes, Pauline reinforces her impression that she and her family are ugly by going to the cinema, finding there a refuge from discrimination and the lack of a vital, supporting African-American community much as Cholly does in his drinking. But the films she enjoys are made by white directors for white audiences and employ white actors. They thus encode the values of middle-class white America and by implication devalue any possible meaning Pauline might find in her own culture. Although not necessarily the intended message of such films, such movies imply that "white is right" and "black is not beautiful." At least that is what Pauline sees in these films, which function for her as a compound emblem — of what is wrong in her life and of an unattainable, correct mode of life (one she can experience only vicariously at the Fosters), as well as of a psychological compensation she needs when contemplating the bleakness of her own life, thus inevitably reinforcing her unhappiness and despair. When she tells her own story, she explicitly labels the movies an unattainable good she cannot even hope to attain: "*White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses ... Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard.*" In Pauline's account we have an indication of Morrison's art. She is completely unaware that in telling her sad story, she emphasizes the degree to which false cultural images can undermine our potential for authentic human relationships by substituting unattainable ideals that make the lives they mock even more miserable than they already are, further undermining our capacity for taking remedial action. Pauline offers nurturing and love to the Fosters, who represent the wealth and power of the oppressor (they give no indication of returning love to her), while she reinforces Pecola's self-hatred and instills in her son Sammy a "loud desire to run away."

One final cultural symbol that demeans the lives of African-Americans operates throughout *The Bluest Eye*, so much so that it is a dominant technical and thematic indicator. Certain chapter sections begin with a variation on the "Dick and Jane" story that once appeared in many elementary school reading textbooks. In Morrison's text these images form another component of adverse cultural indicators: education validates a carefree, Euro-American image of middle class life. Like the movies, the schools reinforce a cultural idea of what is good, desirable — but not attainable by the Breedloves, who are poor and think themselves ugly.

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Themes

The key themes of *The Bluest Eye* have to do with the most fundamental social unit, the family. In addition to the central and obviously dysfunctional Breedlove family, Morrison includes several family clusters in the narrative, each representing a mode of coping with alienation and the false cultural values imposed on minorities. In theory a family should offer a support system even more basic than that of the community to guide individuals in dealing with the pressures society in general imposes on them. In all Morrison's novels the hero's identification with her or his family is a source of dissonance, in many cases a contributor to the characters' low self-esteem and being influenced by false values. For Pecola, Cholly's despair at finding work and meaning in the community, and Pauline's embracing the idea that white is right, lead to alienation and eventual withdrawal into her illusion that she has aesthetic properties valued by the majority. She is as much the victim of her family's accepting the view that they, and especially she, are ugly and worthless, as she is the victim of society's definitions of beauty — the community as a whole reinforces the low self-image her family impresses on her. Morrison frames the discussion of family, nurturing, and alienation with several contrasting families whose value systems represent alternatives to the Breedlove's dysfunctional unit.

Some chapter sections are introduced by a variation on the Dick and Jane story, each with its own specific reference to the chapter's central narrative. On the whole Dick's and Jane's life represents a cultural ideal, a model of what family life ought to be in America: loving parents, amiable friends, happy puppies, picket fences, spacious houses, abundant resources. If such a life is an unattainable ideal in Euro-American middle-class life, how much more despairing it must be for African-Americans denied access to opportunity and victimized by prejudice to be presented with this cultural manifestation of what should be, and by implication, what is.

One family aspires toward this ideal; much of Pecola's story is told by Claudia MacTeer, a member of this family. The MacTeers aspire toward the Dick and Jane lifestyle but are fated to fall short of attaining it. Claudia as a child, however, felt a rebellious hatred for Shirley Temple, who "danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing and chuckling with me." Unconsciously as a child (perhaps not so as an adult), Claudia resented the denigration of Afro-American familial figures to emblems of submissiveness and racist stereotypes. She also harbored a resentment of European-American culture, sublimating this rancor in the form of acts of violence against white dolls. As an adult Claudia realizes this mutilation was her displaced rage against white America's economic and attitudinal tyranny. Yet her family seeks to capture its own small piece of the American dream, and Claudia dares not express her resentment of white folks to her family.

A central community virtue would be charity, and the MacTeers offer this by caring for Pecola when her father is in jail. The daughters feel responsibility toward this unhappy child, and they are horrified by the disorderly life the Breedloves lead; but when Cholly's rape of his daughter becomes a public event, the MacTeer girls' good intentions no longer prevail. As their friend's shame becomes public, and as the sad fates of the surviving Breedloves become a community curiosity, Claudia and Frieda do not re-establish contact with Pecola. Claudia, a relentless self-critic, realizes in retrospect that, while she and her sister loved Pecola, they like everyone else used her: "All of us ... felt so wholesome when we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness." Claudia's reassertion of Pecola's ugliness suggests that she may have bought into the despised Shirley Temple standard more than she understands.

Other families offer variations on the themes of absent familial support and reinforcement of cultural images of despair. Maureen Peal, a light-skinned newcomer who emulates Euro-American style and culture, is surprisingly sympathetic to Pecola until other children begin to taunt her, Claudia, and Frieda. When Maureen realizes the costs associated with being Pecola's friend, she validates the child's insult, and Claudia, recognizing Maureen as a walking "white doll," swings at her but hits Pecola instead in the novel's most

transparent symbolic gesture. Maureen's parting taunt indicates the relationship between her family's strategy of submission and the hatred such minorities feel for other members of their ethnic group.

Geraldine, another emigrant from the South, like Pauline tries to appropriate white cultural aesthetics; but unlike Pauline she emulates these and internalizes them. She thus alienates herself and her son (significantly named Junior, although his father has no real presence in the novel or in his family's life), from the African–American community. She develops Junior in the image of the reading primer's Dick and explains "to him the difference between colored people and niggers." In her effort to Europeanize Junior, Geraldine creates a monster. Rejected by his peers, he compensates for his alienation by inflicting violence on little girls. In what must be intended as a suggestion of incipient sexual deviancy, he selects Pecola because she is "always alone ... because she was ugly" to lure to his house with the promise of seeing some kittens. His trick backfires, for his cat (significantly black with blue eyes) seems fond of Pecola so he throws it violently against a window, probably hurting it severely. When he tells his furious mother Pecola killed the cat, Geraldine, seeing in Pecola's homeliness and uncleanliness all she has been seeking to avoid, does not investigate. She accepts Junior's account of the event and orders the "nasty little black bitch" out of her house, adding a religious as well as cultural weight to Pecola's self-loathing, as she stares at a portrait of Jesus while retreating from another lovely home in which she is despised by a family fleeing its own African–American origins.

A final variation on the family theme involves the Whitcomb clan, represented in the book by its sole survivor, Elihue (Soaphead Church). This family has reacted to Euro–American dominance by literally attempting assimilation. The ancestors took pride in their white blood, and attributed their achievements to their white ancestry. Eventually this attribution led the family to inbreeding (as in Robinson Jeffers's narrative poems, incest in this novel symbolizes excessive preoccupation with social position) in order to prevent contamination by African–American gene pools. Like Geraldine, the Whitcombs by making a hybrid have created a monster. Elihue, a failed Anglican priest and social worker as well as a frustrated homosexual, has evolved into a potential child molester. Claudia's father beats him for making sexual advances to Frieda. When Pecola seeks his advice on how to achieve blue eyes, Whitcomb sees "an ugly little girl asking for beauty" and panders to her need for approval. The exchange he requires is perverse and exploitative. If she will (unwittingly) poison a dog Soaphead despises, he promises to intercede with God to give her the blue eyes she lacks. Elihue gets what he wants, a dead dog; Pecola comes to believe the lie that she has blue eyes. In a letter Elihue blames God for Pecola's vulnerability, but accepts no moral responsibility for having exploited Pecola and contributed to her madness.

In fact every family in *The Bluest Eye* is dysfunctional. They perpetuate illusions and pass on a legacy of rage, despair, frustration, and untruth. Although the Breedloves are the most unfortunate among those Morrison represents, her despairing theme in this novel is that families fail to meet the challenge of creating a future free of Euro–American value systems imposed dangerously on African–American citizens made even more vulnerable to racial self-contempt by a fractured community.

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Techniques

The Bluest Eye gave clear evidence of the innovative, original writer Morrison would be. For a first novel, it is unusually daring and rich in technical innovations involving voice, point of view, and associations.

The most dramatic innovation is the repetition of portions from the elementary reader "Dick and Jane" story that introduces various sections of the novel. The archetypal happy family to whom we are introduced as

children, and whose lifestyle we are unconsciously encouraged to emulate, functions as a norm and the components of family happiness are the very things the MacTeers seek and the Breedloves cannot get. Dogs and cats, Dick's and Jane's happy pets, also foreshadow key disillusioning events in Pecola's life. She sees Junior harm his cat and Soaphead tricks her into poisoning a dog.

Moreover, Morrison repeats many of the Dick and Jane stories in alternating typefaces. As many critics have suggested the orderly, properly punctuated version of the story represents the lifestyle and aspirations of Dick and Jane, or the Foster family — European–American groups empowered by wealth and caste. The single–spaced version, with no internal punctuation, and combining several simple sentences into a run–on paragraph, represents African–American families who aspire to emulate the Dick and Jane archetype, like the MacTeers and Geraldine's family. The final version, in which syntax is distorted by the absence of space even between words, represents the chaos of the Breedloves, who live in a store and have no hope to catch the American dream. Subsequent repetitions of the "Breedlove version" of the Dick and Jane story are printed in ALLCAPS, with no spaces between words and sentences, and with the selections blocked typographically, thus often ending with words uncompleted — suggesting the incomprehensibility of the dream for folks like the Breedloves, and the box into which our cultural stereotypes place us.

Morrison also arranges the story around a seasonal myth. Pecola's story begins in autumn, and each section corresponds to a season. Like many mythic works of this century, notably T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), seasonal myth is undercut with modern irony. For example, spring, the season of birth and new beginnings, coincides with Cholly's drunken assault on Pecola, resulting in a monstrous pregnancy. Cholly's departure, the remaining Breedloves' alienation, the baby's death, and Pecola's madness, occur in summer, traditionally the season of fullness and growth. Thus Morrison has followed the ironic bent of modern mythmakers by undercutting traditional mythic associations with irony.

Another innovative feature of this novel is the multiple points of view Morrison uses to tell the Breedloves' story. Claudia MacTeer narrates the first section of each of the seasonal chapters that make up the novel. Claudia as a character is involved in Pecola's story; she is a friend who regrets Pecola's fate. But because of the cultural differences between them (Claudia's father like Morrison's worked several jobs to make a living) she can never understand Pecola fully and, finally, she has to confess her own inability to respond to her friend's need and her psychological exploitation of her friend. She provides a sympathetic but not wholly reliable witness to events.

The remaining sections are told by an omniscient narrator, who seems intent on providing a sympathetic account of each character's history: of Cholly's youthful humiliation, Pauline's contentment in nature, Geraldine's resolve to climb the social ladder, and even Soaphead's family's quest to avoid contamination. This sympathetic voice, however, is undermined by horrors the narrator represents, without explicit condemnation, each character doing. The point of this narrative strategy seems to be to suggest that, no matter how heinous the acts of people like Cholly, Pauline, and Soaphead, these aberrations spring from some human longing, and the perpetrators are victims of others' as well as their own past labeling. This idea is particularly true of Soaphead's story, a key portion of which takes the epistolary form. Soaphead writes a letter to God explaining his mistreatment of Pecola, in which he narrates key events, attempts to exonerate himself in taking advantage of the child's miserable state, and finally accuses God of creating misery in an imperfect world. Although Morrison probably does not intend *The Bluest Eye* to be a jeremiad against the injustice of an imperfect universe — her irony implies that Soaphead attempts to escape from responsibility through his narrative — she intends us all to reflect on the obligations of being part of an imperfect creation that permits racism and economic injustice impose on all of us.

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Literary Precedents

The Bluest Eye takes its place in a distinguished tradition of African–American literature concerned with the struggle to assert cultural and individual values in the face of majority, or European–American cultural and economic dominance. The novels of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Jean Toomer, and James Baldwin offer distinguished male African–American versions of the struggle. Morrison has stated in interviews that she was unaware of the work of female African–American writers whose work attempted similar themes while she was writing *The Bluest Eye*, but she subsequently discovered her literary kinship with such predecessors as Zora Neale Hurston and Paule Marshall. It is tempting to ponder how much the reassessment of writers like Marshall and Hurston owes to the success of Morrison's fiction.

Another American literary tradition in which to situate *The Bluest Eye* is the series of works in which children are the victims of cultural insensitivity. Ernest Hemingway once remarked that American literature begins with Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and the theme of the adolescent as victim seems to begin there as well. Like Pecola Huck is victimized by a dysfunctional family and by a culture's version of what is respectable conduct. Significantly, *Huckleberry Finn* is also about racism. The most important decision Huck makes is to help Jim escape from slavery; and Huck makes this choice believing that it is immoral to go against his culture's endorsement of slavery. Like Huck, Pecola suffers from an abusive family, a rigid society, and low self–esteem. Unlike Huck, however, Pecola's story is one of defeat, not of victory. For Twain, Huck's natural virtues enable him to overcome the racism his society encodes in its members; for Morrison Pecola is overwhelmed by her culture's values — perhaps because she buys into those values herself.

Thus *The Bluest Eye* addresses the issue of the child as innocent victim of a culture that is in decline. This seems a particularly modernist theme, and Morrison's novel compares with such modernist expressions as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) as a treatment of the spiritual and conceptual victimization of children by a culture that has lost its way.

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Ideas for Group Discussions

The Bluest Eye generates spirited discussion on the nature, extent, and ubiquity of prejudice in modern America, and other texts on this subject by writers like Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara can develop useful dialogues about prejudice, its effects, and possible cures. The novel can also be approached as a treatment of the theme of individual freedom and cultural limitations on that freedom. Many of the questions that follow are intended to stimulate conversations on the tone of *The Bluest Eye*, or the attitudes implicit in Morrison's characterization and rhetoric.

1. To what degree are Cholly's and Pauline's mistreatments of their children explained by their own past experiences of racism and low cultural self–esteem? Are other characters in the novel more successful in overcoming the same kind (or degree) of prejudice?
2. How fair a characterization of American cultural aspirations is the Dick and Jane story by which Morrison introduces many chapters? Is this stereotype an insidious way for the educational system to implant ideas and images in children's minds? Is the stereotype more painful for members of minority than mainstream culture? Why or why not?

3. How do we react to Elihue Whitcomb's accusing God for making the world imperfect? Is this Morrison's view as well? Does religion play a part in the victimization of people like Pecola?

4. How effective is the option to a racist culture exercised by the MacTeer family? Does Morrison suggest that these well-intentioned people, who after all practice charity, are reacting usefully or creatively to discrimination? Does the adult Claudia, who narrates part of the novel, seem to have recovered from her times of hatred for white culture (Shirley Temple and the violence on the dolls)?

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