

The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison

Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* came about at a critical moment in the history of American civil rights. Morrison began Pecola's story as a short piece in 1962; it became a novel-in-progress by 1965. It was written, as one can see from the dates, during the years of some of the most dynamic and turbulent transformations of Afro-American life.

One of those transformations was a new recognition of Black-American beauty. After centuries of coveting white dolls and decades of longing to look like Caucasian Hollywood stars (and thinking that it was perfectly appropriate to do so), Black-Americans began to argue for a new standard of beauty. This new standard was meant to be racially inclusive, allowing blacks to see black as beautiful, but the need to argue for this new standard reveals how firmly the white standard of beauty was entrenched.

In a new Afterword to the novel's 1993 reprint, Morrison says that she got the idea for *The Bluest Eye* in part from an elementary school classmate. The girl, whose wish for the eyes of a white girl revealed her contempt for her own racial identity, raised troubling questions about beauty and oppression. As an emerging writer, she remembered the girl and became interested in the mechanics of feelings of inferiority "originating in an outside gaze." Pecola's tragedy was not meant to be typical, but by showing societal and situational forces working against an extremely vulnerable little girl, Morrison hoped to get at a truth about those societal forces. The effect is like speeding up film of a slow process?by looking at the extreme case of Pecola, we learn the truth about our world, a truth that we are normally incapable of noticing.

The novel also set up many of the issues with which Morrison has been concerned ever since. The style is fragmentary, a kind of democratic narrative in which many narrative voices are privileged to speak. Morrison has used variations of this system in other novels, favoring this strategy as a way to look at a story from many angles without giving too much control to one voice. And Morrison's concern with oral Black-American traditions is apparent from the very first lines of Claudia's prelude.

But in this particular novel, Morrison has attempted to examine the forces that can make the oppressed take part in their own oppression. How can it be that a little girl could be made to feel so ugly? Why do the black children of the novel and of the period insult each other by calling each other black? What does it mean (and what does it do) when a black woman wishes she could look like Jean Harlow? How has this happened? What has been lost? Is there a way out?

The Bluest Eye enjoyed some (but far from universal) critical success on its first publication, but the novel was also a commercial failure. In 1993, after Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Plume published a new edition with a new Afterword by the author.

Autumn: Chapter 1

Outside a Greek hotel, Rosemary Villanucci, a white neighbor of the MacTeer family, taunts Claudia and Frieda MacTeer from the Villanucci's Buick. School has started, and the sisters are expected to help gather coal that has fallen out of the railroad cars. Their house is spacious but old, drafty, and infested with rodents. During one trip to

gather coal, Claudia catches a cold. Her mother is angry but takes good care of Claudia, who does not understand that her mother is mad at the sickness, not her. Frieda comforts Claudia by singing to her—or at least Claudia remembers it this way. In hindsight, she also remembers the constant, implicit presence of love.

The MacTeers are getting a new boarder, Henry Washington. The children overhear their mother explaining that he was living with the elderly Della Jones but that she has grown too senile for him to stay there. Mrs. MacTeer also explains that Miss Jones's husband ran off with another woman because he thought his wife smelled too clean. Henry has never married and has the reputation of being a steady worker. Mrs. MacTeer says the extra money will help her. When Henry arrives, the children adore him because he teases them and then does a magic trick: he offers them a penny but then makes it disappear so that the girls must find it hidden on his person.

There is also a second addition to the MacTeer household, Pecola Breedlove. She is temporarily in county custody because her father burned down the family's house. Pecola is the object of pity because her father has put the family "outdoors," one of the greatest sins by community standards. Having joined the MacTeers, Pecola loves drinking milk out of their Shirley Temple cup. Claudia explains that she has always hated Shirley Temple and also the blonde, blue-eyed baby doll that she was given for Christmas. She is confused about why everyone else thinks such dolls are lovable, and she pulls apart her doll trying to discover where its "beauty" is located. Taking apart the doll to the core, she discovers only a "mere metal roundness." The adults are outraged, but Claudia points out that they never asked her what she wanted for Christmas. She explains that her hatred of dolls turned into a hatred of little white girls and then into a false love of whiteness and cleanliness.

It is a Saturday afternoon, and Mrs. MacTeer is angry because Pecola has drunk three quarts of milk. The girls are avoiding Mrs. MacTeer and sitting bored on the steps when Pecola begins bleeding from between her legs. Frieda understands that Pecola is menstruating (though she calls it "ministratin'") and attempts to attach a pad to Pecola's dress. Meanwhile, Rosemary, who has been watching from the bushes, yells to Mrs. MacTeer that the girls are "playing nasty." Mrs. MacTeer starts to whip Frieda, but then sees the pad, and the girls explain what has happened. Mrs. MacTeer is sorry and cleans

up Pecola. That night in bed, Pecola asks Frieda how babies are made. Frieda says you have to get someone to love you. Pecola asks, “How do you get someone to love you?”

Autumn: Chapter 2

This short chapter is dedicated to describing the apartment, which was formerly a store, that the Breedloves move into once Cholly Breedlove, Pecola’s father, is out of jail. Nowadays the storefront is abandoned, and so the narrator moves backward in time. Before it was abandoned, the storefront housed a pizza parlor, and before that, a Hungarian bakery, and before that, a Gypsy family. The narrator supposes that no one remembers the time when the Breedloves lived there, back when the storefront was divided into two rooms by some wooden planks. In the front room, there are two sofas, a piano, and an artificial Christmas tree that has not been taken down for two years. In the bedroom are beds for Pecola, her brother, Sammy, and their parents, and a temperamental coal stove. The kitchen is in a separate room in the back.

The narrator focuses on the furnishings. The furniture is aged but not by frequent use; it does not hold any memories. It has been “conceived, manufactured, shipped, and sold in various states of thoughtlessness, greed, and indifference.” The only piece of furniture that calls up any emotion is the couch, which fills its owner with anger. Though bought new, the couch has a split down the middle, and the store refuses to take it back. The coal stove seems to have a mind of its own; its heat is unpredictable. One thing is certain: the fire will always be dead in the morning.

Autumn: Chapter 3

[I]f those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.

The narrator announces that the Breedloves live in the storefront because they are black and poor, and because they believe they are ugly. They are not objectively ugly. Though they have small, closely set eyes and heavy eyebrows, they also have high cheekbones and shapely lips. They are ugly because they believe they are ugly. The action that now unfolds takes place on a Saturday morning in October. Mrs. Breedlove wakes first and begins banging around in the kitchen. Pecola is awake in bed and knows that her mother will pick a fight with her father, who came home drunk the previous night. Each of Cholly’s drunken episodes ends with a fight with his wife. Mrs. Breedlove comes in and attempts

to wake Cholly to bring her some coal for the stove. He refuses, and she says that if she sneezes just once from fetching the coal outside, he is in trouble.

The narrator comments that Mrs. Breedlove and Cholly need each other—she needs him to reinforce her identity as a martyr and to give shape to an otherwise dreary life, and he needs to take out a lifetime of hurt upon her. When Cholly was young, two white men once caught having sex with a girl. They forced him to continue while they watched. Instead of hating the white men, Cholly hated the girl. Because of this and other humiliations, Cholly is a violent and cruel man. The fights between him and Mrs. Breedlove follow a predictable pattern, and the two have an unstated agreement not to kill each other. Sammy usually either runs away from home or joins the fight. Pecola tries to find ways to endure the pain.

Predictably, Mrs. Breedlove sneezes, and the fight begins. She douses Cholly with cold water and he begins to beat her. She hits him with the dishpan and then a stove lid. Sammy helps by hitting his father on the head. Once Cholly is knocked out, Sammy urges his mother to kill him, and she quiets him. Pecola, still in bed, feels nauseated. As she often does, she wills herself to disappear. She can imagine each body part dissolving except for her eyes. She hates her ugliness, which makes teachers and classmates ignore her. For a long time, she has hoped and prayed for blue eyes, which will make her beautiful and change all the evil in her life to good.

Pecola walks to the grocery store to buy candy. She wonders why people consider dandelions ugly. She decides to buy Mary Janes, but she has difficulty communicating with Mr. Yacobowski, the store owner, who seems to look right through her. He does not understand what she is pointing at and speaks harshly to her. He does not want to touch her hand when she passes over her money. Walking home, Pecola is angry but most of all ashamed. She decides dandelions are ugly, whereas blonde, blue-eyed Mary Jane, pictured on the candy wrapper, is beautiful.

Pecola goes to visit the whores who live in the apartment above hers, China, Poland, and Miss Marie. They are good-natured and affectionate with her, and they tell her about their “boyfriends” (Pecola’s term for their clients). Miss Marie tells stories about turning one of her boyfriends over to the FBI and about Dewey Prince, the one man she truly loved. The narrator tells us that these are not hookers with hearts of gold or women whose innocence has been betrayed. Quite simply, these women cheerfully and

unsentimentally hate men. They feel neither ashamed of nor victimized by their profession. Pecola wonders what love is like. She wonders if it is like her parents' lovemaking, during which her father sounds as if he is in pain and her mother is dead silent.

Winter: Chapter 4

Winter arrives, which means boredom and the long wait for spring. But this winter, the arrival of a new girl named Maureen Peal breaks the monotony. She is a light-skinned, wealthy black girl who enchants the whole school. Claudia and Frieda dislike her and search for flaws. They are relieved to discover that she has a dog tooth and stumps where her sixth fingers were removed. She has a locker next to Claudia's, and one day she suggests that she walk part way home with Claudia and Frieda.

Soon the three girls come upon a circle of boys harassing Pecola. Shouting a derogatory chant, they taunt her for her black skin and because her father sleeps naked. Frieda comes to the rescue, hitting one boy and threatening another. Claudia joins the fray, and it looks as if the boys will beat up the MacTeer girls, but then Maureen arrives on the scene. The boys do not want to fight in front of Maureen and leave. Maureen takes Pecola's arm and talks to her about movies and gym class. She asks the girls if they want some ice cream and treats Pecola. Claudia is embarrassed because she thought Maureen would treat her as well. Instead, she goes without ice cream. The girls talk about menstruation, and Maureen asks Pecola if she has ever seen a naked man. Pecola says she has never seen her father naked, and Maureen presses the issue. Claudia and Frieda tell Maureen to cut it out, and Claudia remembers the shame and strange interest of seeing her own father naked. The girls argue: Claudia accuses Maureen of being boy-crazy, and Maureen tells the girls they are black and ugly. Pecola is pained, and Claudia secretly worries that what Maureen has said is true.

When the girls arrive home, only Henry is there. He gives them money for ice cream, but they decide to buy candy instead because they do not want to run into Maureen again. When they come home, they see Henry entertaining the prostitutes China and the Maginot Line (Miss Marie) in the living room. Claudia and Frieda are disturbed because they know that their mother hates these women. The girls come in after the

women leave, and Frieda asks Henry about them. He lies and says they are members of his Bible-study group. The girls decide to keep his secret.

Winter: Chapter 5

This chapter describes in detail a particular type of black woman. She comes from some small, rural town in the South, full of natural beauty, where everyone has a job. She takes special care of her body and her clothes. She goes to a land-grant college and learns how to do the work reserved for her, the care and feeding of white people, with grace and good manners. She marries and bears the children of a man who knows that she will take good care of his house and his clothes. But she also is a tyrant over her home and over her own body. She does not enjoy sex. She feels affection only for the household cat, which is as neat and quiet as she is. She caresses and cuddles the cat in a way that she refuses to caress or cuddle her family.

Then such a woman enters the novel. Her name is Geraldine, she is married to a man named Louis, and they have a son named Junior. Geraldine takes excellent physical care of Junior, but early on, he understands that she feels real affection only for the cat. In response, he tortures the cat and torments children who come to play at the nearby school playground. Junior would have liked to have played with the black children, but his mother will let him play only with upper-class "colored" people, not lower-class "niggers."

One day, a bored and isolated Junior decides to pick on Pecola, who is passing through the playground. She tells him she does not want to play, but he lures her into his home by promising to show her some kittens. Pecola is overwhelmed by the beauty and cleanliness of the house. Meanwhile, Junior throws the family cat, which has black fur and blue eyes, in her face. Scratched and shaken, Pecola tries to leave, but Junior stands on the other side of the door and shuts her in. The cat begins to rub against Pecola, and its friendliness distracts her from crying. She caresses the cat as Junior opens the door. Angered that the cat is getting attention, he picks it up and swings it around by one of its hind legs. The cat is terrified, and Pecola tries to rescue it. When she pulls Junior down, he lets go of the cat, and it hits the radiator and collapses in a lifeless heap. At this moment, Geraldine comes home, and Junior tells her that Pecola has killed the cat. Geraldine calls Pecola a "nasty little black bitch" and sends her away.

Spring: Chapter 6

Spring arrives, and Claudia associates this event with being whipped with a switch instead of a strap. She lies in an empty lot ruminating and then heads home. She finds her mother singing and behaving strangely, absentmindedly doing the same chore twice. She finds Frieda upstairs crying. It turns out that Henry touched Frieda's breasts. Frieda ran from the house to find her parents, who were in the garden, and told them what had happened. She returned with her parents to the house, but Henry was gone. When he returned, Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer attacked him. A neighbor, Mr. Buford, arrived and gave Mr. MacTeer a gun. He shot at Henry and Henry ran away. Rosemary Villanucci came out and told Frieda that her father would go to jail, and Frieda hit her. Then another neighbor, Miss Dunion, came in and suggested that they take Frieda to the doctor because she might be "ruined," a fear that now makes Frieda weep.

Frieda and Claudia are confused about what "ruined" means and worry that Frieda will become fat like the Maginot Line. They understand that China and Poland are "ruined" as well but think that they are not fat because they drink whiskey. Frieda and Claudia decide to ask Pecola to get whisky from her father in order to keep Frieda from getting fat. They go to Pecola's house, but no one is home. The Maginot Line is upstairs on the porch drinking root beer, and she tells the children that Pecola is helping her mother at her workplace. She invites the girls upstairs for a soda, but Frieda tells her that they are not allowed to visit her because she is "ruined." The Maginot Line throws the root-beer bottle at the girls in anger, but then she laughs. Claudia and Frieda run away and decide that even though Pecola's mother works on the other side of town, Frieda's situation is dire enough that they should go find her.

Frieda and Claudia walk to the lakefront houses, in a beautiful neighborhood with a park that is for white children only. They find Pecola at the back of one of the prettiest houses. She is surprised to see them, and they ask her why she is not afraid of the Maginot Line. Pecola is confused and talks about how nice Miss Marie (that is, the Maginot Line) and her friends are. Mrs. Breedlove sticks her head out the door, is introduced to the girls, and tells them they can wait with Pecola for the laundry and then walk back to town with her. The inside of the house is beautiful, and a small white girl comes in and asks for "Polly." Claudia is furious that the child calls Mrs. Breedlove by this name because even Pecola calls her mother "Mrs. Breedlove." From upstairs, the little girl calls for Polly, and

Pecola accidentally pulls a freshly baked berry cobbler off the counter. The cobbler splatters on the floor and burns her, and her mother comes in and beats her. Furious, Mrs. Breedlove sends the girls away and comforts the little white girl, who has begun to cry.

Spring: Chapter 7

This chapter recounts Mrs. Breedlove's story. She grows up in Alabama as Pauline Williams, and when she is two years old, she impales her foot on a nail. Forever afterward, she walks with a slight limp, and she believes that this accident determined her destiny. During her childhood, she is isolated from other family members, and therefore cultivates her own pleasures. She enjoys arranging things, creating order and neatness out of clutter. Her family later migrates to Kentucky, where they move into a sizable house with a garden. Pauline is put in charge of caring for the house and her two younger siblings, Chicken and Pie. She enjoys this life, but once she turns fifteen, she becomes restless and melancholy. She begins to dream of a stranger—a man, or a god—who will take her away with him.

Then one day, a stranger arrives. Pauline is standing in the garden and hears a young man whistling. Suddenly she feels him tickling her bad foot and turns to meet the gaze of Cholly Breedlove. They fall in love, and he treats her with tenderness. They decide to marry and move up north to Lorain, Ohio, where there are more jobs. Then life becomes more difficult. Pauline feels lonely and isolated, and she is surprised by how unfriendly the other women are. They are amused by her country ways. She begins to long for clothes that will make the women look at her differently, and she and Cholly begin to argue about money. Cholly's drinking becomes a problem.

At this point, Pauline takes her first job as a housekeeper in a white woman's house. The white woman is well-off but petty and foolish. Her family has dirty habits. One day, Cholly shows up at the woman's house drunk and demands money, and Pauline leaves her job. The woman will not give her the job back or the rest of her pay unless Pauline leaves Cholly. Pauline refuses and is left without money for cooking gas.

Soon thereafter Pauline realizes she is pregnant. Cholly is happy and their marriage improves, but Pauline is still lonely in their apartment. She takes refuge in the movies and develops destructive ideas about physical beauty and romantic love. She tries to make herself look like a movie star, but then while chewing candy at a movie, she loses one of

her front teeth. From then on, she feels ugly, and she and Cholly begin to fight again. Her first baby fails to fill the hole in her life. She talks to her second baby in the womb, vowing to love her no matter what. When she gives birth in the hospital, a doctor tells a group of students that black women do not feel pain while giving birth; they are “just like horses.” Despite this insult, Pauline is pleased with her new baby, Pecola, but knows the baby is ugly.

Pauline then takes on her identity as martyr. She joins the church and becomes the family breadwinner, securing a job with the Fishers, a wealthy family who appreciate her good work. She loves her work because it allows her to make things beautiful and orderly. She begins to neglect her own house and family. At times, she remembers the good times with Cholly, when their lovemaking turned everything into rainbows. Now their lovemaking occurs while he is drunk and she is half-asleep.

Spring: Chapter 8

This chapter recounts the history of Cholly Breedlove. His mother abandons him on a trash heap when he is four days old, but his Great Aunt Jimmy rescues him. She beats his mother and his mother runs away. After four years of school, Cholly gathers the courage to ask Aunt Jimmy his father’s name; it is Samson Fuller. After two more years of school, Cholly takes a job at Tyson’s Feed and Grain Store and meets a man named Blue Jack. Blue Jack entralls Cholly with his stories and shares the heart of a watermelon with him at a church picnic. Cholly remembers this kindness for a long time.

Then Aunt Jimmy gets sick. The community calls in M’Dear, the local healing woman, whose height and authority impress Cholly. She prescribes pot liquor, and Aunt Jimmy begins to improve, but then she eats a peach cobbler and dies. Cholly finds her the next morning. He does not immediately feel grief, because everyone takes care of him during the funeral and he is fascinated by all the excitement. Aunt Jimmy’s brother, O.V., and his family plan to take care of him.

Cholly tries to impress one of his older cousins, Jake, by taking him to a place where the girls are. Jake persuades a girl named Suky to take a walk with him, and Cholly persuades the girl he likes, Darlene, to come along as well. They eat muscadine berries and chase each other, and then lie down to rest. When they get up to head back, Darlene

tickles Cholly, and the two of them begin to touch each other. Just as Cholly is having sex for the first time, two white hunters shine their flashlights upon him. They tell him to continue while they watch, and Cholly pretends to finish. The men leave when they hear their dogs. Cholly is furious with Darlene instead of with the white men because some part of him knows that if he feels anger against the white men, it will destroy him.

It occurs to Cholly, irrationally, that Darlene might be pregnant, and he decides to run away and look for his father. He finds some money that Aunt Jimmy had hidden and spends several months working his way toward Macon, Georgia, where his father lives. He finally purchases a bus ticket, arrives in Macon, and is sent to an alley to look for his father. There he finds men gambling in various states of excitement and desperation. When he asks for Samson Fuller, he finds a man who looks especially fierce, but who is, to Cholly's surprise, shorter than he is. Samson thinks that Cholly has been sent by a creditor (or perhaps the mother of another child he has fathered) and curses him. Cholly stumbles back into the street and, in his effort not to cry, defecates in his pants. He runs to the river, hides under the pier, and washes his clothes after dark. For the first time, he feels grief for Aunt Jimmy.

From this point forward, Cholly is free in a dangerous way. He loves and beats women, he takes and leaves jobs, and he kills three white men—all the while remaining indifferent. He is indifferent about when or how he dies. He meets Pauline, and her sweetness and innocence make him want to marry her, but marriage makes him feel trapped. His interest in life is sapped, and he begins to drink. Most of all, he does not know how to relate to his children.

Now, in the present, Cholly comes home drunk and finds Pecola doing the dishes. With mixed motives of tenderness and rage, both fueled by guilt, he rapes her. She faints, and he covers her with a quilt. She wakes to find her mother looking down at her.

Spring: Chapter 9

The narrator tells the history of Soaphead Church, a self-declared “Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams” in Lorain’s black community. A light-skinned West Indian, he was raised in a family proud of its mixed blood. His family has always been academically and politically ambitious, and always corrupt. Family members have always tried to

marry other light-skinned people, and, if unable to do so, they have married one another. Soaphead Church's father was a sadistic schoolmaster and his half-Chinese mother died soon after he was born. Born Elihue Micah Whitcomb, Soaphead Church soon learned the art of self-deception and developed a fascination and revulsion for dirt and decay.

Soaphead married a woman named Velma, but she left him two months afterward. Next, he pursued the ministry but soon discovered that the profession was not right for him. He studied psychiatry and other social sciences, took different jobs, and finally came to Lorain. He rents a back room from an elderly lady named Bertha Reese, and his only hardship is her old dog, Bob, which disgusts him with its runny eyes. Soaphead buys poison to kill the dog but is too repulsed to go near it.

At this point, Pecola comes to ask him to give her blue eyes. He is touched by this request—his own attraction to whiteness makes it easily comprehensible. He knows he cannot help her, but he tells her to give meat—which he has secretly poisoned—to the dog. He tells her that if the dog reacts, her wish will be granted. The dog convulses and dies, and Pecola runs away.

Soaphead then writes a rambling and incoherent letter to God in which we learn more about his understanding of his life. He still feels rejected by Velma, who left him “the way people leave a hotel room.” He describes his love for the newly budding breasts of young girls (we have already been told that he is a pedophile). He remembers two girls, Doreen and Sugar Babe, who let him touch them in exchange for money and sweets. He tells God that he did not touch Pecola and brags that he has rivaled God by granting her wish—she will not literally have blue eyes, but she will believe she does. Soaphead closes his letter and thinks lovingly about all the miscellaneous objects he has collected. He is asleep when his landlord discovers her dead dog.

Summer: Chapter 10

Summer arrives, a time of storms. Claudia remembers a storm her mother told her about that blew away half of South Lorain in 1929. She imagines her mother being pulled up into the air, smiling with her hand on her hip, unconcerned. Frieda and Claudia are selling marigold seeds to earn money for a new bicycle. Even though their mother has told them only to visit houses they know, they tromp all over town. When they are invited

in at homes they know to refresh themselves with a cold drink, they overhear adult conversations and begin to piece together a story about Pecola.

Claudia and Frieda learn that Pecola has been impregnated by her father. Cholly has now run away. The neighborhood gossips are disgusted by Cholly's action but also blame Pecola. They think she should be taken out of school. When her mother found her, she beat her almost to death. The gossips think that it would be best for the unborn baby to die. Claudia and Frieda are embarrassed and hurt for Pecola, and their sorrow is intensified by the fact that none of the adults seems to share it. Claudia can picture the baby in the womb, with beautiful eyes, lips, and skin. She thinks that wanting Pecola's baby to live is a way to counteract everyone else's love of white dolls and white little girls. She and Frieda are unconcerned with the incestuous component of the story—they do not understand how babies are made in the first place.

Claudia and Frieda decide to help Pecola by praying and by giving a sacrifice; they will give up their seed money and plant the rest of the marigold seeds. They will bury the money by Pecola's house and bury the seeds in their own yard so that they can tend them. Claudia will sing and Frieda will say the magic words.

Summer: Chapter 11

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.

Two voices are in dialogue: Pecola and an imaginary friend, whose voice is in italics. The friend criticizes Pecola for looking in the mirror constantly, but Pecola cannot stop admiring her new blue eyes. The imaginary friend wants to go out and play, and Pecola accuses her of being jealous. Pecola agrees to go outside, however, and brags that she can look at the sun without blinking. Pecola tells her friend that now that she has blue eyes, no one looks at her, not even her mother. She thinks they are jealous. Pecola wonders why the imaginary friend has not come before, and the friend tells her that she did not need her before. Pecola explains that she no longer goes to school because people are prejudiced against her blue eyes. She asks her friend if her eyes are the very bluest, and her friend reassures her. She asks her imaginary friend where she lives, and the friend rebuffs her. Pecola worries that her mother does not see her new friend.

The imaginary friend begins talking about Cholly. She speculates that Mrs. Breedlove must miss him. She observes that they had sex a lot, but Pecola counters that he made her do it. The friend says that Cholly made Pecola do it as well, and Pecola denies this. The friend reminds Pecola that Cholly raped her again while she was reading on the couch. Pecola explains that she did not tell her mother because her mother did not believe her the first time. Now both Cholly and Sammy are gone for good. The friend implies that Pecola enjoyed Cholly's sexual advances the second time, and Pecola gets angry. They decide to return to the topic of her eyes. Pecola worries that someone somewhere may have bluer eyes than she. She wants her friend to examine everyone's eyes to see if they are bluer than hers. She wonders if her eyes are "blue enough" but cannot say blue enough for what. The friend tells her she is being silly and temporarily departs.

Claudia begins to narrate and describes Pecola's madness. Pecola wanders the street jerking her arms as if trying to fly. Claudia and Frieda feel like failures because their flowers never grow and Pecola's baby is prematurely stillborn. Cholly dies in a workhouse, and Pecola and Mrs. Breedlove move to a house on the edge of town. Claudia feels that the town has dumped all its garbage upon Pecola, and all her beauty. Pecola's ugliness allowed all the others to believe they were beautiful, healthy, and sanctified. Claudia feels herself to be no better than the others and implicates herself in using Pecola as a scapegoat. She believes that the Maginot Line and Cholly loved Pecola but that love is only as good as the lover, and therefore Cholly's love killed her. It is too easy simply to blame the climate of the town as inhospitable to certain kinds of people or flowers. In any case, in the final words of Claudia, "it's much, much, much too late."

Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe.

The Bluest Eye is split into an untitled prelude and four large units, each named after a season. The four larger units begin with "Autumn" and end in "Summer," with each unit being split into smaller sections. The first section of each season is narrated by Claudia MacTeer, a woman whose memories frame the events of the novel. At the time that the main events of the plot take place, Claudia is a nine-year-old girl. This device allows Morrison to employ a reflective adult narrator without losing the innocent perspective of a child. Claudia MacTeer lives with her parents and her sister in the humble MacTeer family house in Lorrain, Ohio. The year is 1939.

The novel's focus, however, is on a girl named Pecola Breedlove. Pecola, we are told in the prelude, will be raped by her father by novel's end. The prelude frames the story so that the reader knows from the beginning that Pecola's story ends tragically. The Breedloves are poor, unhappy, and troubled. Their story seems in many ways to be deterministic, as they are often the victims of forces over which they have no control. Their situation is a powerful contrast to the MacTeers, who are of slender means but have a strong family unit. The MacTeers also seem to have much stronger agency, and are never really passive victims in the way that the Breedloves are.

When Claudia is not narrating, a third-person narrator takes her place. The narrative style, even in third person, is one of great psychological intimacy. The third-person narrator of *The Bluest Eye* is no dispassionate observer, but one who gives insights into the thoughts of characters and occasionally interprets events in a very explicit manner. The sections narrated in the third person are all focused on some aspect of Pecola's life—the sections explore either a family member or a specific significant event. These sections have headings, taken from a reading primer's Dick and Jane story. The use of the primer is a biting comment on the distance between Pecola's life and the pink-skinned bourgeois world in the Dick and Jane story. Each heading is a clean, straightforward match up: the section about Pecola's house is headed by a Dick-and-Jane sentence about their house, the section about Pauline is prefaced by a Dick-and-Jane sentence about their mother, etc.

The basic plot is very simple: when Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father, attempts to burn their house down, Pecola is sent by social workers to stay temporarily with the MacTeers. Claudia and Frieda befriend the girl, who is lonely, abused, and neglected. While staying with the MacTeers, she menstruates for the first time. Her first period, as the reader must consider it, becomes an upsetting event—it makes it possible for her to be impregnated later by her own father. Pecola Breedlove goes back to live with her family, and we see aspects of her life depicted one section at a time. The Breedlove home is a converted storefront, cold and in disrepair. Pauline and Cholly Breedlove fight incessantly and with terrifying ferocity—their battles always end up being physical—and her brother Sammy runs away from home constantly. The Breedloves' name is suggestive and ironic: "love" is exactly what the family lacks, and certainly they are unable to generate more of it, as suggested by the word "breed." Instead, "breed" becomes an ominous reference to what Cholly ends up doing with his own daughter.

Pauline is an unhappy woman who takes refuge in the wrathful and unforgiving aspects of Christianity. She lavishes her love on the white family for whom she works, while her own family lives in squalor. Cholly is an angry and irresponsible man, violent, cruel, and uncontrollable. All of the Breedloves are considered ugly, although part of the novel's work is to question and deconstruct what that ugliness really means. To get away from her parents and to pass the hours, Pecola spends a great deal of time with the whores

who live upstairs. China, Poland, and Marie tolerate her presence without providing any deep love for the girl.

Pecola is obsessed, we learn, with blue eyes. She prays for them constantly, and is convinced that by making her beautiful the blue eyes would change her life. From Pecola's wish and from many other events in the novel, it becomes clear that most of the people in Lorraine's black community consider whiteness beautiful and blackness ugly. The novel has many characters who long to look white, and also has several characters of mixed ancestry who emulate whites and try to suppress all things in themselves that might be African. Soaphead Church's Anglophile family and Geraldine are examples of this kind of black person.

The MacTeer family goes through their own small dramas, as Frieda and Claudia deal with stuck-up schoolmates and a lecherous boarder. Consistently, the MacTeer family is able to insulate the girls from harm. When their boarder, a man named Mr. Henry, makes an indecent pass at eleven-year-old Frieda, Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer react with force, protecting their daughter violently and without any doubt of her innocence. In contrast, in the Breedlove family the sexual threat comes not from outside the family unit but from within. One Saturday in spring, Cholly rapes Pecola. He rapes her a second time soon afterward. Pecola then becomes pregnant with her father's child.

Miserable and desperate, Pecola believes more than ever that blue eyes would change her life. She goes to a pedophilic fortune-teller named Soaphead Church to ask for blue eyes. Soaphead Church decides that he can use her for a small task, and so he uses an unwitting Pecola to kill a dog that he hates. She completes the task, which she believes will be like a transformative spell. The dog dies in a gruesome manner, and Pecola runs away in terror. The next time we see Pecola, she's lost her mind. She spends all of her time talking to a new "friend"; he/she is an imaginary friend who is now the only person with whom Pecola speaks. The topic of conversation is most frequently the blueness of Pecola's eyes. Pecola spends the rest of her life as a madwoman.

The title of the novel provides some interesting insights about standards of beauty. Morrison is interested in showing the illusory nature of the social construction of beauty, which is created in part by the imaginary world of advertising billboards and movie stars. The title uses the superlative of blue because at the end of the novel, when Pecola has gone mad, she is obsessed with having the bluest eyes of anyone living. But the title also has "eye" in the singular—by disembodiment of the eye, Morrison subverts the idea of beauty or standards of beauty, tearing the idealized part away from the whole, creating a beauty icon that is not even human. Reinforcing this non-human aspect of the ideal eye, Pecola's new blue eyes at the novel's end are not described with colors in the human range—her eyes are blue like streaks of cobalt, or more blue than the sky itself.

At key points in the novel, important plot information is revealed through gossip. Morrison writes long stretches of beautiful and uninterrupted dialogue, with great sensitivity to oral language. Pauline Breedlove gets a chance to speak in the first person near the middle of the novel; in a section divided between third-person narrator and Pauline, she gets to address the reader directly and in dialect. Morrison's interest in carving a place for oral language in literary art is readily apparent in this novel.

Morrison occasionally switches tense, moving fluidly to present tense when it serves her. The move has different effects: for some scenes, it provides a sense of great immediacy. In one sequence narrated by Claudia, it creates the feel that Claudia is reliving the experience. In other scenes, it creates the feel of a pattern. When Pecola tries to by

candy at a local grocer's, we read about the moment in present tense. In this case, Morrison's use of the present tense suggests that the unpleasant interaction between Pecola and the shopkeeper forms a template for all of her interactions with other human beings.

Morrison, by employing multiple narrators, is trying to make sure that no single voice becomes authoritative. The gossiping women become narrators in their own right, relaying critical information and advancing the story at key points. Claudia's perspective is balanced by the third person narrator, and Pauline Breedlove narrates for parts of one of the middle sections of the novel. This method of multiplying narrative perspectives also demands more active participation on the part of the reader, who must reassemble the parts in order to see the whole. Morrison is still working somewhat clumsily with this type of narrative in *The Bluest Eye*. In later novels, she has a chance to experiment and refine her forms further.

Character List

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

(Pecola is the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, but despite this central role she is passive and remains a mysterious character. Morrison explains in her novel's afterword that she purposely tells Pecola's story from other points of view to keep Pecola's dignity and, to some extent, her mystery intact. She wishes to prevent us from labeling Pecola or prematurely believing that we understand her. Pecola is a fragile and delicate child when the novel begins, and by the novel's close, she has been almost completely destroyed by violence. At the beginning of the novel, two desires form the basis of her emotional life: first, she wants to learn how to get people to love her; second, when forced to witness her parents' brutal fights, she simply wants to disappear. Neither wish is granted, and Pecola is forced further and further into her fantasy world, which is her only defense against the pain of her existence. She believes that being granted the blue eyes that she wishes for would change both how others see her and what she is forced to see. At the novel's end, she delusively believes that her wish has been granted, but only at the cost of her sanity. Pecola's fate is a fate worse than death because she is not allowed any release from her world—she simply moves to “the edge of town, where you can see her even now.”

Pecola is also a symbol of the black community's self-hatred and belief in its own ugliness. Others in the community, including her mother, father, and Geraldine, act out their own

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

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

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

Pauline (Polly) Breedlove - Pecola's mother, who believes that she is ugly; this belief has made her lonely and cold. She has a deformed foot and sees herself as the martyr of a terrible marriage. She finds meaning not in her own family but in romantic movies and in her work caring for a well-to-do white family.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Themes

Whiteness as the Standard of Beauty

The Bluest Eye provides an extended depiction of the ways in which internalized white beauty standards deform the lives of black girls and women. Implicit messages that whiteness is superior are everywhere, including the white baby doll given to Claudia, the idealization of Shirley Temple, the consensus that light-skinned Maureen is cuter than the other black girls, the idealization of white beauty in the movies, and Pauline Breedlove's preference for the little white girl she works for over her daughter. Adult women, having learned to hate the blackness of their own bodies, take this hatred out on their children—Mrs. Breedlove shares the conviction that Pecola is ugly, and lighter-skinned Geraldine curses Pecola's blackness. Claudia remains free from this worship of whiteness, imagining Pecola's unborn baby as beautiful in its blackness. But it is hinted that once Claudia reaches adolescence, she too will learn to hate herself, as if racial self-loathing were a necessary part of maturation.

The person who suffers most from white beauty standards is, of course, Pecola. She connects beauty with being loved and believes that if she possesses blue eyes, the cruelty in her life will be replaced by affection and respect. This hopeless desire leads ultimately to madness, suggesting that the fulfillment of the wish for white beauty may be even more tragic than the wish impulse itself.

Seeing versus Being Seen

Pecola's desire for blue eyes, while highly unrealistic, is based on one correct insight into her world: she believes that the cruelty she witnesses and experiences is connected to how she is seen. If she had beautiful blue eyes, Pecola imagines, people would not want to do ugly things in front of her or to her. The accuracy of this insight is affirmed by her experience of being teased by the boys—when Maureen comes to her rescue, it seems that they no longer want to behave badly under Maureen's attractive gaze. In a more basic sense, Pecola and her family are mistreated in part because they happen to have black

skin. By wishing for blue eyes rather than lighter skin, Pecola indicates that she wishes to see things differently as much as she wishes to be seen differently. She can only receive this wish, in effect, by blinding herself. Pecola is then able to see herself as beautiful, but only at the cost of her ability to see accurately both herself and the world around her. The connection between how one is seen and what one sees has a uniquely tragic outcome for her.

The Power of Stories

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

Sexual Initiation and Abuse

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

these experiences are humiliating and hurtful indicates that sexual coming-of-age is fraught with peril, especially in an abusive environment.

In the novel, parents carry much of the blame for their children's often traumatic sexual coming-of-age. The most blatant case is Cholly's rape of his own daughter, Pecola, which is, in a sense, a repetition of the sexual humiliation Cholly experienced under the gaze of two racist whites. Frieda's experience is less painful than Pecola's because her parents immediately come to her rescue, playing the appropriate protector and underlining, by way of contrast, the extent of Cholly's crime against his daughter. But Frieda is not given information that lets her understand what has happened to her. Instead, she lives with a vague fear of being "ruined" like the local prostitutes. The prevalence of

sexual violence in the novel suggests that racism is not the only thing that distorts black girlhoods. There is also a pervasive assumption that women's bodies are available for abuse. The refusal on the part of parents to teach their girls about sexuality makes the girls' transition into sexual maturity difficult.

Satisfying Appetites versus Suppressing Them

A number of characters in *The Bluest Eye* define their lives through a denial of their bodily needs. Geraldine prefers cleanliness and order to the messiness of sex, and she is emotionally frigid as a result. Similarly, Pauline prefers cleaning and organizing the home of her white employers to expressing physical affection toward her family. Soaphead Church finds physicality distasteful, and this peculiarity leads to his preference for objects over humans and to his perverse attraction to little girls. In contrast, when characters experience happiness, it is generally in viscerally physical terms. Claudia prefers to have her senses indulged by wonderful scents, sounds, and tastes than to be given a hard white doll. Cholly's greatest moments of happinesses are eating the best part of a watermelon and touching a girl for the first time. Pauline's happiest memory is of sexual fulfillment with her husband. The novel suggests that, no matter how messy and sometimes violent human desire is, it is also the source of happiness: denial of the body begets hatred and violence, not redemption.

The Bluest Eye

Characters

Samson Fuller

Cholly Breedlove **Pauline (Polly) Breedlove**

Mrs. MacTeer

Mr. MacTeer

Pecola Breedlove **Sammy Breedlove**

Claudia MacTeer

Frieda MacTeer

Henry Washington - The MacTeers' boarder

China, Poland, Miss Marie - The local whores

Mr. Yacobowski - The local grocer, a middle-aged white immigrant.

Rosemary Villanucci - A white, comparatively wealthy girl who lives next door to the MacTeers.

Maureen Peal - A light-skinned, wealthy black girl who is new at the local school.

Geraldine - A middle-class black woman

Junior - Geraldine's son

Soaphead Church - He is a religious hypocrite.

Aunt Jimmy - The elderly woman who raises Cholly.

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

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