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Toni Morrison: The Bluest Eye

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The Literary Encyclopedia

The Bluest Eye

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Morrison, Toni
(1970)

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Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston in 1970 while Morrison was an editor for Random House in New York City. She remained at Random House until 1983, the year after the publication of her fifth novel *Beloved*. Morrison's inaugural novel received faint praise from most, though not all, reviewers, primarily because few of the reviewers for the well-known national publications understood the book. Reviews in small circulation publications such as *Black World* and *Freedomways* were notable exceptions. Nevertheless, as a first-time novelist Toni Morrison's notices in the *New*

York Times Book Review and *The New Yorker* gave her national recognition that was invaluable for even the moderate success of her innovative novel. Morrison had embarked upon the task of writing what she has said are the novels that she would want to read yet that were not available to her; she was thirty-nine years of age when *The Bluest Eye* was published.

The provenance of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is in her participation in a writers' group at Howard University during the years that she taught there. Morrison quickly wrote a short story for a meeting of this group. Morrison has said that she based the story, which was later to become the novel, on her response to a childhood classmate's expressed wish for blue eyes, an idea that struck Morrison as a form of violence—that is, her perception of its suggestion of mutilation.

During the politically charged second half of the 1960s, Morrison worked as an editor in New York, and while there, she returned, in 1965, to her story of the little black girl who wanted blue eyes. And in so doing, Toni Morrison initiated her examination in literature of the issues of beauty, love, family,

community, and class within African American culture, as she began revising her short story into the novel that would be published five years later.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is strongly influenced by the 1960s Black Power/Liberation era and the Black Arts Aesthetics Movement (BAAM) in the United States, especially their questioning of hegemonic constructions of Western cultural ideas and ideals. They were particularly concerned with concepts, ideals, and systemic structures that worked to diminish black people. This novel further operates as a response to the challenge among Black Aesthetic artists to question and resist such delimiting influences. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is one example of the numerous efforts at the time toward reconstructing a cultural context out of which African American people could operate and toward making possible a reconstituted identity. By the time Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was published, the Black Arts Aesthetics Movement, the literary cohort of the Black Power/Liberation era, was well underway. And many of its varied concepts and ideas in relation to cultural aesthetics likely were influences on Toni Morrison's

writing of her first novel, although her writing in this novel does not demonstrate a wholesale acceptance of any specific line of thought besides her own.

Toni Morrison's writing style and a number of her prevalent themes to date are set forth in *The Bluest Eye*, her initial foray into the literary world. Some of Morrison's recurrent themes include the possibility of female autonomy in an African American cultural context, the operations of a women's domain, motherhood, love, the household in relation to the community, beauty, and reconstructing history, heritage, and personal identity. In terms of her style, the ease and appropriateness with which Morrison, in her first novel, employs African American as well as Midwestern American vernacular speech and her carefully selected idiomatic phrases from African American culture allow her to present the particularities of these specific cultural speech patterns without at the same time suggesting that the language is an aberration or a type of linguistic violation, which had been the burden under which many of her predecessors had operated; rather, the sense that Morrison gives her readers in *The Bluest Eye* and in subsequent novels is that she

has reconstructed the language of a place. Another particularly noteworthy aspect of Morrison's first novel as well as of later books —*Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* in particular—is her apperceptive, insider narrative voice or voices.

Among the three narrators that Morrison employs in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia MacTeer, a precocious youth of intuitive wisdom, is her most compelling, as she presents a retrospective view on the malefic events of 1940-1941 in Lorain, Ohio. Through Claudia's first person account of events, Morrison's readers gain intimate knowledge of the beliefs and mores of the people presented in this book. Her readers further observe how Morrison's youthful characters perceive and misperceive this knowledge as they are acculturated into it. In addition to Claudia's first-person narrative, Morrison provides her readers with a third-person narrator to fill in important gaps that are outside of Claudia's sphere of knowledge. Morrison's final narrative voice in *The Bluest Eye* is that of the subjective consciousness of Pauline Breedlove, the mother of the central character in the novel, Pecola. Morrison has critiqued this narrative point-of-view as a technical flaw in the novel. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's apperceptive

insider narrator is Claudia and her third-person narrator complements Claudia by providing depth to her insights.

Toni Morrison's lamentable story of Pecola Breedlove's utter susceptibility and of the purblind, cruel destruction of her is divided into four chapters that bear the names of the seasons and that are organized on the life cycle of school children in the United States—which occurs from autumn through summer—instead of on the traditional seasonal cycle of birth and death, spring through winter. The main text of the novel is preceded by two untitled prologues, which provide contexts for understanding the events that will occur throughout the book. The first prologue recapitulates the family romance that is the typical story found in the Dick and Jane primary readers that children encountered in school up through the 1970s. Morrison presents the story three times, with each retelling becoming increasingly more difficult to read, as the font and punctuation in the text are altered in each iteration after the first, although the exact words do not change. Morrison uses fragments from the Dick and Jane reader as epigraphs to selected sections within her seasonally named chapters. By her

use of this innovative technique, Morrison presents an explicit critique of the dominant discourse on family.

Morrison's first prologue is followed by an italicized second prologue that presents a concise summary of the tragic events of Pecola Breedlove's life within the context of a metaphor of planting and growing flowers. Morrison's narrative voice in this prologue, and the primary narrator throughout her novel, Claudia MacTeer, also meditates on the problems of flowers that don't grow: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941". Claudia also introduces herself, her older sister Frieda, and Pecola to readers.

The events in *The Bluest Eye* occur over a one-year period beginning the autumn of 1940 and coinciding with the onset of Pecola's menses at eleven years of age. When the novel opens, Pecola Breedlove is living briefly with the MacTeers after her father burned down their house. The novel ends during the impending wartime years of the summer of 1941 when Pecola, an impoverished, Depression era young black girl, goes insane and believes that she has received the blue eyes that she has asked God to give her, but which she gains only in her

mind and solely through the deranged machinations of Elihue Micah Whitcomb. Whitcomb is the neighbourhood charlatan who poses as a spiritualist and psychic reader and whose own perverse predilections and racial psychosis allow him to find Pecola's request—rather than grotesque—the most keenly rational and superlative, even if impossible, that he has ever received.

During that pivotal autumn in 1940, Pecola returns to her family who now live in a converted storefront. Throughout her first chapter in *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison establishes the harsh environment of Pecola's family life. She also presents the more generally shared deleterious social narratives of romance and ideal beauty that pervade, primarily through media images, the culture in which Pecola Breedlove lives. These images and ideas clearly affect the lives of Morrison's other characters in this novel, including Claudia who raises objections to the unquestioning acceptance of these received notions of beauty and love. In Morrison's “Winter” and “Spring” chapters, she illustrates Pecola's alienation from other children in her neighbourhood, except Claudia and her sister Frieda, and demonstrates how Pecola's light-

skinned African American classmate Maureen Peal as well as her mother's blond-haired, blue-eyed charge in the house where Mrs. Breedlove works both garner social privileges based solely in their proximity to an arbitrary beauty ideal. In these chapters Morrison also delineates the backgrounds of Pecola's parents, describes various social classes among African Americans, and introduces the unhinged misanthrope Elihue Micah Whitcomb. Toni Morrison ends *The Bluest Eye* with the narrative voice of Claudia MacTeer presenting a final meditation on the events of 1940-1941 and with Pecola's summer insanity, as this psychologically ravaged young girl discusses her supposed, newly-acquired blue eyes with an imagined friend.

Toni Morrison's Pecola Breedlove wants desperately to be loved, although her understanding of love is limited to corrupt versions of it, including the romantic ideals that she finds within the media culture of the United States. Through Morrison's frequent references to movie actors and actresses, including the child actresses Shirley Temple and Jane Withers as well as media idols such as Greta Garbo, Ginger Rogers, Claudette Colbert, Betty Grable, Hedy Lamarr, Clark

Gable, and Jean Harlow, this writer points to the way in which Pecola's environment is saturated with media images that present false ideals of beauty and romantic love. Morrison then critiques these concepts as her narrator states that romantic love and physical beauty are “Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion”. Pecola, however, not only wants love she also wants to be beautiful, as she believes that if she is beautiful someone will love her. Morrison's Pecola, unfortunately, does not find love inside or outside her home.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison initiates her practice of presenting the specific locations of the houses of her major characters along with a precise description of the atmosphere within their homes. The location and the internal environment of Morrison's households reveal crucial components of her characters. Pecola lives in a storefront that has been converted into a living space located “on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street” in Lorain, Ohio. This young girl lives in an environment in which love is compromised by money, violence, betrayal, and societal alienation. Three prostitutes—Poland, China,

and Marie, also referred to as the Maginot Line—live in an apartment above the Breedloves'. Pecola is the second child and the only girl in a family where, unfortunately, love is no longer a consideration and where they have accepted the conviction of their supposed ugliness. The Breedloves—Cholly, the father, Pauline, the mother, Sammy, the older brother, and Pecola—are a poor family. They have been singled out by others in their small community of European immigrants and black migrants from the South as ugly, yet Morrison's description of the physical features of the Breedloves defies any objective assignment of ugliness, except in the case of Cholly whose behaviour is ugly.

Morrison's writing in *The Bluest Eye*, as would be the case in many of her later novels, is irrevocably beautiful while her subject is disturbing. Her probing investigation into the damaging effects of arbitrary, fanciful, and uncritical thinking that could produce ideal beauty forces all of her readers to examine their own complicity in giving power to the monolith suggested in Morrison's title. The singular eye of this book's title does not refer to Pecola's desired eyes but to the power invested in the constricting social narrative—which has no basis in logical reason—that disparages

Pecola while declaring someone else ideal. Morrison's title, then, refers to “the *Thing* that made [others] beautiful” and Pecola ugly. Toni Morrison tells a story that illustrates how such illogic happens.

Because of the increased stature and prominence that Toni Morrison has acquired as a writer, her provocative first novel has undergone a critical rebirth in recent years, after finding moderate success and qualified recognition upon its first publication.

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