

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**The Bluest Eye**

by Toni Morrison

written by Rhonda Carwell

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# The Bluest Eye

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. analyze the style of narration used in the novel
2. trace the development of plot through the novel identifying
  - exposition
  - conflict
  - rising action
  - climax
  - resolution
3. analyze the development and contribution of certain motifs:
  - seasons
  - the Dick and Jane narrative
  - dirtiness and cleanliness
  - self-hatred
4. trace the development of themes:
  - perception based on appearance is not always a true reality
  - racism and prejudice exist within and between races
  - the definitions of beauty and ugliness as set by society, not the individual
  - societal expectations set for members who have no control over setting those expectations
5. analyze the relationship between chapter titles and the development of themes
6. trace the importance of the past on character and situation
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam
8. respond to free response items similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam

## Introductory Lecture

### THE GREAT MIGRATION: AFRICAN AMERICAN MIGRATION TO THE NORTH

Between 1916 and 1920, approximately 500,000 African Americans migrated to northern cities from the South. This exodus occurred for many reasons, among them the failure and destruction of the cotton crop causing a fall in prices, an economic depression in the South, and the “Jim Crow” laws, which limited the freedom of black Americans in schools, hotels, restaurants, train cars, hospitals, and government. Most African Americans flocked to larger cities, believing that these northern cities held employment and opportunities for advancement that the South did not. However, this was not always the case, and oftentimes, African Americans found themselves facing hardships they were not prepared for. Many of the prejudices that were held in the South existed in the North as well. African Americans were believed to be lower in intelligence and ability than their white counterparts. African Americans were believed to be less reliable workers than were European immigrants who had also traveled great distances for a chance at better lives. Oftentimes, African Americans found themselves used as “scabs” to replace workers on strike, thus endangering themselves for work and further alienating them from their potential future co-workers.

With the onset of World War I, foreign immigration was limited, and the pool of cheap labor dried up. Factories and businesses turned to African Americans to fill labor vacancies, knowing that blacks, grateful for work, would not demand the high wages and tolerable working conditions demanded by white laborers. World War II again provided more opportunities for employment as white laborers were shipped overseas as soldiers. Word spread quickly in the South that there were more jobs and higher wages in northern cities. Some African Americans sought to escape life in the South, hoping to find material success in the North. Others hoped to earn and save and eventually return to their southern homes and families. Still others were encouraged by family who wanted to remain in the South while they benefited from the “transplant’s” success.

Whatever the reasons for the migration, African Americans found that they were, by and large, no more welcome in the North than they had been in the South, and they faced new sets of challenges as a result. Despite the occasional individual success, the situation for blacks in both the North and the South did not begin to improve significantly until the Civil Rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, and the aftermath of a series of Supreme Court decisions and Congressional acts.

# The Bluest Eye

## Prologue

1. How do the narration and the increasing lack of coherence of the Dick and Jane story foreshadow what is to come?

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2. What do the narrator’s opening words serve to demonstrate about the girls?

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3. “It never occurred to us that the earth itself might have been too unyielding.” The narrator attempts to understand the events that are to come, and how she played a role in them. What connection is she trying to create?

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4. How can the description “unyielding earth” be applied to society?

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5. “*But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.*” What does this line tell the reader about the events to come?

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## Autumn

1. The opening pages of this section are narrated in the first person by Claudia, the youngest MacTeer girl. What is the purpose of these pages?  
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2. Claudia observes, “Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration.” What do Claudia’s words imply about her understanding of adults?  
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3. Although Claudia’s mother is guilty of the adult behavior Claudia criticizes, in what ways does she redeem herself?  
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4. What does the conversation between Mrs. MacTeer and her friends concerning Della Jones and Mr. Henry establish?  
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5. Carefully read the paragraph that begins with the words, “Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance....” and ends with “So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre.” What devices does Morrison employ to convey meaning to the conversation overheard by the girls?  
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6. At this time period, what place did children hold in the household?  
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Winter

1. What are the standards by which Claudia and Frieda evaluate Maureen Peel?

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2. Claudia’s hatred of Maureen seems more intense than Frieda’s. Why is this less surprising than it would have been if Frieda’s dislike were worse?

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3. As the boys surround Pecola, insulting her, what does her behavior imply about her character?

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4. Why do the boys halt their teasing when Maureen is a witness but not when Claudia or Frieda threaten them?

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5. What does Maureen share about her family? What insight does it provide?

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6. Why does the descriptor of “black” hold such power as an insult to Claudia and Frieda?

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7. Why is fear of the “Thing” greater than the jealousy of Maureen?

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**Spring**

1. In what way are the tender spring branches much like Claudia and Frieda?

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2. Why is it not surprising that Mr. Henry abuses Frieda?

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3. In what way do Claudia and Frieda reveal their immaturity as Frieda revisits the encounter with Mr. Henry?

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4. How does the neighborhood where Mrs. Breedlove works reinforce the notion that “white” equals “beauty”?

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**Summer**

1. How do the girls learn about their friend Pecola? What earlier social attitudes does this episode echo?

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2. What is significant about the fact that the neighbors blame Pecola for her rape as well as Cholly?

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3. Why do the neighbors all wish for the baby's death?

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4. What is significant about the fact that Claudia and Frieda feel sympathy for Pecola while everyone else shuns her and wishes the baby would die?

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5. Why does Claudia wish so fervently for Pecola's baby to live?

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6. What evidence of the MacTeer girls' naïve innocence is provided in this chapter?

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