Teaching Toni Morrison's

The Bluest Eye

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Rhonda Carwell

PH

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General Introduction to the Work

Genre

*T*HE BLUEST EYE by Toni Morrison is a novel, in part a coming-of-age story and in part a modern tragedy. There are elements of both realism and postmodernism in the action, characterization, themes, and narrative voices.

Feminist Theory Applied to *The Bluest Eye*

Notes on the Feminist Theory

Feminism is an evolving philosophy, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the "modern woman."

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Understanding the impact of gender on character development

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Bluest Eye*: Feminist Activity One: Comparing Male and Female Characters.

2. As a class, *briefly* discuss whether Pauline is a sympathetic character. Have students provide and make note of the source(s) of this sympathy or lack of it.

3. Similarly, have the class *briefly* discuss whether Cholly is a sympathetic character and why (or why not).

4. Divide the class into an even number of pairs or groups.

5. Assign half of the groups (or allow them to choose) to examine Pauline while the other half examines Cholly.

6. Have each group review the chapters that tell Pauline's and Cholly's stories and list pertinent facts about the story *and how it is told* on the handout. As the examples indicate, students should use the rectangles to state the facts and the ovals to discuss the significance of that fact to their understanding of, and sympathy with, their character.

7. Redistribute the groups so that each new group has at least one member who examined Pauline and at least one who examined Cholly.

8. Have them share their findings with their new groups and have every student complete his or her graphic.

9. Reconvene the class and allow students to share their findings.

10. As a class, discuss the following:

    • What overall impression is made of Pauline as a woman and Cholly as a man? Are those images positive or negative? Why?

    • Who is the stronger of the two characters? What could be the reason for this? Would it be seen in the same way within the society in which they live?

    • In what ways are Pauline and Cholly shown to be dependent on each other? Is it a healthy dependence?

    • What differences can be seen in how each character is revealed to the reader? Whom does the reader come to "know" better? Why? What might this say about men and women in general?

Formalism Applied to *The Bluest Eye*

Notes on the Formalist Approach

T HE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called "New Critics," and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining characters' contributions to the novel

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *The Bluest Eye*: Formalist Approach Worksheet One: Everyone is Important and *The Bluest Eye*: Formalism Activity One Character Map.

2. As a whole class, make a list of the characters of *The Bluest Eye*.

3. Categorize each character as major, secondary, or minor. Allow students to discuss the placement of each character. If there are disagreements over a certain character, allow students to place that character where they believe he or she belongs.

4. Divide the class into an even number of pairs or small groups.

5. Assign half the groups (or allow them to choose) to complete the *Everyone is Important* handout. Have the other half complete the character map.

6. Redistribute the groups so that each new group has students who completed each of the handouts.

7. Have students in their new groups share their responses.

8. Reconvene the class and discuss the role, function, and importance of secondary and minor characters in the novel.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *The Bluest Eye*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Approach

THE TERM "PSYCHOLOGICAL" (also "psychoanalytical" or "Freudian Theory") seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.

- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining the novel for evidence of the Id, Ego, and Superego

1. As a class, review the information on the id, ego, and superego in the Notes on Psychoanalytic Theory. Discuss the main characteristics of each component.

2. With the class, generate a list of characters from *The Bluest Eye* who have a direct impact on the main characters, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola. Be certain the list includes:

    • Pauline Breedlove
    • Cholly Breedlove
    • Claudia
    • Frieda
    • Junior
    • Pecola
    • Poland, China, and Miss Marie (divided or together)
    • Soaphead Church
    • Geraldine
    • Maureen
    • Mr. Henry

3. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.

4. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the three components of the personality.

5. Have the groups then determine which characters in the list might, by their role in the story, relationship to the main characters, or by their actions, represent the group's assigned component.

6. Have the groups note evidence from the story to support their interpretation.

7. Reconfigure the groups so that each new group has at least one representative of the id, ego, and superego. Have them share their findings and discuss any discrepancies, especially instances of assigning the same character to more than one component of the subconscious.

NOTE: While the students discuss these discrepancies, as long as each cannot support the character's assignment with an accurate understanding of Freud's theory and of the text, students do not need to agree or come to consensus.

8. Reconvene the class and discuss the various characters' roles.