

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Bluest Eye

by Toni Morrison

written by Rebecca Challman

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The Bluest Eye

Introduction

The Bluest Eye, 1970, is Morrison's first novel, and she set it in her hometown of Lorain, Ohio. It took her years to write, but was mostly overlooked by critics. In it, she calls attention to the issue of internalized racism; more specifically, black people hating themselves for failing to live up to white ideals of beauty and happiness.

The Bluest Eye tells the tale of Pecola Breedlove, a victim of family violence, poverty, and racial hatred, who longs to be truly loved. She believes blue eyes are the key to garnering love and happiness. After all, blacks and whites alike adore the blue-eyed Shirley Temple. Thus, Pecola, surrounded by poverty and hatred, renounces her own blackness and begins a descent into madness.

Claudia MacTeer, Pecola's well-adjusted schoolmate, narrates most of the story as a child caught up in the events of 1941, and later as an old woman looking back on them. In medias res, Morrison adeptly shifts to a third-person narrator, and allows some of the characters to recount details from their pasts. This makes even the most heinous character, Pecola's father who rapes her, somewhat sympathetic.

NOTE: In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison deals with mature subject matter such as incest, racial hatred, violence, adolescent sexual exploration, and prostitution. She uses racial slurs and curses. Moreover, she graphically describes incidental sex and Pecola's rape by her father.

To the Student

This journal will enable you to respond to *The Bluest Eye*. As you devote yourself to a close reading of the text, develop your own questions and observations. Try to identify the various motifs of the novel. Determine which are personal and which are universal. Ask yourself, what is Toni Morrison's attitude toward the motifs? What is her message?

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Pre-Reading

1. Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* in the late sixties, a tumultuous time in which a generation that survived the Great Depression sent their children off to war in Vietnam. Black people and women were fighting for equal rights. Meanwhile, as blacks began recognizing their power as a collective, they also began ridding themselves of the self-loathing absorbed over generations. The “Black is Beautiful” movement fought to release blacks from mainstream propagandized ideas of what constitutes beauty and happiness. *The Bluest Eye* highlights how young black girls are especially susceptible to white ideas of beauty and happiness.

Consider the events happening in the world today. Imagine you are an author, and you want to call attention to some current critical social issue. What issue would you choose? Would you choose fiction or nonfiction as your platform? Write a brief synopsis detailing how you would address a social issue in a book.

2. Reflect on the title *The Bluest Eye*. To what do you think the author is referring? How might readers interpret the phrase literally? How might readers interpret the phrase figuratively? Why do you think Morrison uses the singular eye?
3. A blurb is a brief but positive review of a book that usually appears on the back cover or the inside sleeve of the dust jacket. The purpose of the blurb is to get the reader to buy the book. Therefore, a blurb should intrigue the reader, but not reveal too much.

Reread the blurb on *The Bluest Eye*. Note how it concisely summarizes the book while only hinting at tantalizing details. Now, write an enticing blurb for your autobiography. What will make readers buy the story of your life?

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Prologue

4. Morrison precedes her narrative with text from an old grade school reader. Pecola Breedlove's story, as told by Claudia MacTeer, contrasts violently with the preceding text, which is what schoolchildren all across America were reading in 1941. The juxtaposition of the happy family in a lovely home with the impoverished life of the narrator, and later the protagonist, serves to jar the reader. Thus, Morrison gives the reader a clue: You are about to enter a messy, unpredictable world.

If you were to contrast an existing text with the story of your life, what book would you choose? Using Morrison's technique as an example, write the first few paragraphs of your novel.

5. Morrison reveals the crux of her story in the first two lines of the novel: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow."

Write a short story about a pivotal event from your childhood. Reveal the main plot point in the first few lines of the story.

6. *The Bluest Eye* unfolds in Morrison's hometown of Lorain, Ohio. As you read, you will come across references to actual stores and places in the town. In this way, Morrison weaves fiction with some truth. This lends verisimilitude to the narrative.

Imagine you have entered a contest to get your favorite author to set a novel in your hometown. How is your town unique? How is your town a good setting for the type of story your favorite author writes? Write a humorous and descriptive paragraph to win the contest.

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Autumn

7. When nine-year-old Claudia grows sick, her mother responds with anger, which leaves Claudia feeling humiliated. She is afraid to complain or ask for assistance, but she still feels her mother's concern for her. Despite feeling like she is an inconvenience, she feels loved.

Think about a time in your childhood when you experienced two different or opposing emotions simultaneously. Perhaps you were scared but courageous; perhaps you were embarrassed, yet proud. Write a diary entry detailing your experience.

8. In this section alone, Morrison references five stars: Greta Garbo, Ginger Rogers, Bojangles, Shirley Temple, and Jane Withers. She also mentions Raggedy Ann, Vicks, Alaga Syrup, Sen-Sen Mints, and Nu Nile Hair Oil. All of these references lend authenticity to the narrative.

Thirty years from now, what pop culture icons and items from the present might find their way into a book? Imagine writers of the future must depend on a time capsule assembled by you. What items would you want them to remember, and why?

9. Claudia's illness, and the realization that her family loves her, has a profound impact upon her. For the rest of her life she connects it with fall. Morrison writes, "So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die."

When you think of autumn, what comes to mind? Write a poem that begins with the phrase "When I think of autumn..."

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10. Morrison's dialogue seems authentic because she uses the natural vernacular of her characters. She writes the way she hears real people from her community in Lorain, Ohio, speak, as illustrated in a conversation Claudia hears between her mother and a neighbor:

"Well, I hope don't nobody let me roam around like that when I get senile. It's a shame."

"What they going to do about Della? Don't she have no people?"

"A sister's coming up from North Carolina to look after her. I expect she wants to get aholt of Della's house."

Write a convincing dialogue between you and someone else from your hometown. Remember, dialogue is merely conversation.

11. Without the elements of style, a fictional story can read like a dry technical manual. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison employs figurative language to bring Claudia's narration to life. Personification, metaphor, and simile play an important role in keeping the reader riveted; they are critical elements of her narrative style. One sees this in Claudia's description of an overheard conversation: "Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance...sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Sometimes their words...take strident leaps..."

Write a descriptive paragraph in which you create a metaphor for an everyday activity. You might compare driving to art or a rainstorm to music. Use at least one simile, one metaphor, and one instance of personification.

12. Claudia simply hates the white baby dolls her family has given her over the years. Their pink skin, yellow hair, and blue eyes repulse her. Much to her family's shock and dismay, she destroys them. Why? Because these white dolls represent a standard of beauty that the people around her accept, and even celebrate. This makes Claudia feel rejected. For if her community deems these dolls beautiful and worthy of love, then what of Claudia? Is she ugly? Is she unlovable?