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The Bluest Eye

by

Toni Morrison

1970



MonkeyNotes by TheBestNotes.com Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Lorain, Ohio, Morrison's home town. It is specifically set around Broadway Twenty-First and Thirty-Fifth Streets. The time is 1939-1941. Past time occurs in Alabama and Georgia.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Pecola Breedlove - protagonist of the novel, an 11 year old girl who is raped by her father and becomes pregnant as a result. Pecola gets the idea that if she can change her eyes from brown to blue, she will solve all her problems.

Claudia - the narrator of the novel. She is 9 years old, almost the same age as Pecola during the action of the novel. The narration, however, occurs when Claudia is an adult, remembering back on her childhood.

Frieda - Claudia's 10 year old sister, who does everything with her and is kind to her when her mother is gruff.

Mrs. MacTeer - Claudia's mother, an overworked, very poor woman, who has little time for tender care of her daughters, but who does manage to fulfill her duties as a mother, providing shelter, food, and the amount of sick care for which she has the energy. Her dominant parental tool is to shame her daughters for being so much trouble.

Mrs. Breedlove - Pauline "Polly" Williams Breedlove, Pecola's mother, who moved to Lorain, Ohio from Kentucky, but was born in Alabama. She works as a housekeeper for the Fisher family and.....

Many additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. He or she must usually overcome some opposing force. The protagonist of this novel is Pecola Breedlove, an eleven year-old girl who learns from the adults around her and the.....

Antagonist - Traditionally, the antagonist of a story is the character that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. Plots may have multiple antagonists that work together to oppose the main character. The antagonist does not always have to be a single character or even a character at all. The primary antagonist of this novel is not embodied in a person, but is an idea or a way of thinking. It is.....

Climax - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. Pecola is raped by her father, Cholly Breedlove. This climax is connected to the main plot around internalized racism as it is shown to be both a result of racial conditioning--the phenomenon of.....

Outcome - The outcome, resolution, or denouement of this plot is that Pecola becomes insane. She manifests her insanity in her belief that she has The Bluest Eye of anyone on.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (SYNOPSIS)

The novel opens with the voice of Claudia MacTeer, though she isn't named until later. Claudia remembers an autumn of her childhood when she and her sister Frieda planted marigolds, but they would not grow. Claudia remembers her deprived and oppressed childhood in a poor African-American community. Her mother was so embattled with poverty and work that she had no emotional energy left to provide tender care for her two daughters. She used shame on them regularly. Once, when Claudia got sick, her mother complained unendingly

about the trouble she was causing, but, nevertheless, her mother tended to her to help her get well.

One autumn, Pecola Breedlove came to live with the MacTeers as a special "case" sent by the county because her father, Cholly Breedlove, had burned his family's house and was put outdoors. Mrs. Breedlove was living with her employers, Charlie Breedlove, Pecola's brother, was living with relatives, and Pecola was left to the county to care for. While she was with them, Pecola got her first period. She was shocked at the blood and it took Frieda's help for her to understand it was a normal part of life.

The Breedlove apartment was a two-room affair that used to be a storefront. Its furniture was dilapidated and no one cared for it. The degradation of the furniture and the living quarters both contributed to and resulted from the Breedlove family's general degradation. The Breedloves were all ugly. When people examined this fact, they realized the Breedloves believed in their own ugliness, took it up as a sort of obligatory cloak to.....

THEMES

Main Theme

The oppression or violation of children, especially poor children. This is a systematic phenomenon. Children are granted no voice, no bodily integrity, and no inherent worth by the adults who are their caretakers. If they are lucky like Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, they learn resistance strategies. If they are unlucky like Pecola Breedlove, they learn various kinds of disempowered responses. They internalize

Minor Theme

Internalized racism, the kind of thinking produced when African Americans--or any group targeted by racism--begin to believe the stereotypes about themselves and imagine that

MOOD

The mood of *The Bluest Eye* is tragic. Morrison structures the narrative as a memory of a woman named Claudia MacTeer. Claudia remembers her tenth year spent in her hometown of Lorain, Ohio. During this year, Claudia fought the ideological war on her self esteem. She was inundated with.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio in 1931. Her father, George Wofford was a shipyard welder and her mother, Rahmah Willis Wofford, raised her family. Her family's move from the south to the north is much like the Breedloves in *The Bluest Eye*. Her mother's family moved from Alabama and her father's family moved from Georgia. Rahmah and George had four children, Toni Morrison being the second child. Morrison's family was rich in folkloric knowledge and musical acumen. Her mother sang in the church choir and her grandfather was a professional violinist. Morrison grew up hearing folktales from the adults in her family and community, tales of slave times, Emancipation, tales of dealing with the racism of the white majority, and tales of the supernatural. Morrison married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, had.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Toni Morrison has been experimenting with fiction from the beginning of her literary career with *The Bluest Eye*. It is useful to recognize Morrison's expertise in Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, two masters of experimentation in the novel. They both wrote their most important works in the 1920s and continued writing through the 1940s. They are two of the most important modernist writers of the twentieth century. Modernism was a literary and artistic movement which reached its height in the 1920s. It is known for all.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Chapter 1 is written in the style of a school child's reading book "Here is the house. It is green and white." The reader soon finds it is a Dick and Jane reader, very common in the 1940s and 50s for teaching children not only how to read by using simple sentence structures, but also for teaching children the values of the dominant, European-American culture. The story relates how "Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live" together and are happy together. They have a cat. The mother laughs happily. The father smiles at Jane. They have a playful dog. Jane has a friend who comes to play with her.

Notes

The style of a child's reading book calls forth the reader's memory of the innocence of childhood, an innocence that should be guarded carefully. Soon, however, we find that the seemingly universal description of a happy family is actually a description of only the lucky few families. In this chapter, the only indication that all is not well is the change Morrison makes graphically in the presentation of the sentences. At the beginning, the sentences are strictly divided by standard punctuation and capitalization. Then, capitalization and punctuation are omitted. Then, all spacing is omitted. Words are run together, giving the effect of a record being played at the wrong speed, giving a distorted sound.

CHAPTER 2

Summary

In the fall of the year 1941, there were no marigolds. Now, no one will talk about this fact. The narrator reports that everyone thought there were no marigolds because Pecola was having her father's baby. The narrator says she and her sister were too preoccupied to notice that no one's marigolds grew that year. She and her sister hoped for magic; they hoped if they said the right words over their seeds, everything would be all right with Pecola. When she and her sister realized their seeds would never grow, they blamed each other to keep from feeling guilty. The narrator compares the planting of marigold seeds in the black dirt to Pecola's father "dropping his seeds in his own plot of black dirt." Now, Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, is dead and so is the innocence of the narrator and her sister. Pecola's baby died just as the seeds did. The narrator ends, "There is really nothing more to say--except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how."

Notes

Morrison indicates the difference in mood in this chapter typographically just as she did in chapter one. She uses italics for the entire chapter. The narrator here speaks with the voice of the past, of her childhood. She remembers how she and her sister experienced hearing of the rape of Pecola by her father. She and her sister attempted in their child's logic to counterbalance a crime against nature on one level (incest) with the proper growth of nature on another level (the marigolds). However, "the earth itself was unyielding." Here, Morrison uses the ancient conception of folk wisdom which claims a correspondence between human events and natural events; if something is out of order in the human realm, nature will also seem out of order.

AUTUMN

CHAPTER 3

Summary

Claudia remembers her childhood of poverty. She and her sister, Frieda, see Rosemary Villanucci, their next door neighbor, sitting in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. When Rosemary rolls the window down to tell the girls she cannot let them come in, they stare at her with feelings of envy mixed with hatred. When she gets out of the car, the girls beat her up. Rosemary has white skin and the blows make red marks on her. She tries to bargain with the girls to let her go by offering to let them pull her pants down. They say no in order to be able to refuse something she offers them.

When school starts, Claudia and Frieda get brown stockings and cod-liver oil. They hear tired-sounding adults around them talking about Zick's Coal Company. They are taken to the railroad tracks where they fill bags with pieces of coal that has fallen off the train cars.

The girls return to their old, cold, green house. They have only one kerosene lamp in the house; all the other rooms are dark. Roaches and mice are a constant source of fear. The adults in their lives "do not talk to us--they give us directions." All of the common childhood mishaps, such as falling down and catching cold, are treated with contempt. They are treated with dreaded medicine Black Draught and castor oil.

Claudia becomes ill with a cold after hunting for coal at night. Her mother scolds her for not wearing a hat or scarf on her head. She calls her the biggest fool in town. She orders Frieda to re-stuff the rags in the windows of their room to keep out the cold. Claudia lies down. Her metal garters hurt her legs, but she leaves her stockings on to guard against the cold. The bed is very cold and she dares not move after heating a spot on the bed with her body temperature. After two hours of lying alone, her mother comes and roughly rubs Vicks salve on her chest. Claudia suffers under the rough treatment silently and stiffly. Her mother puts some of the salve into Claudia's mouth. She wraps hot flannel around Claudia's neck and chest and covers her with quilts to make Claudia sweat.

Claudia vomits later in the day. Her mother scolds her for making a mess on the blanket, complaining about not having time to wash it. Claudia only hears the drone of her mother's voice complaining. She knows her mother is not talking to her, only to the vomit, but her mother calls the vomit by her name--Claudia. She wipes up the vomit and covers it with a towel. Claudia lies down again and notices the rags at the window have come loose and cold air is entering the room, but she dares not mention it to her mother. She is humiliated by her mother's anger and she cries. She thinks her mother hates her for getting sick. She does not know her mother is really angry at the illness itself. She vows not to get sick again.

Frieda comes in and feels sorry for Claudia. She sings a song to her "When the deep purple falls over sleepy garden walls, someone thinks of me . . ." Claudia falls asleep and dreams about plums and walls and "someone."

Claudia pauses to wonder if her childhood was really as painful as she remembers it. She decides it was only mildly bad. Then she decides it was a "productive and fructifying pain." She remembers love also seeped in everywhere in the house. When the flannel came loose during the night and she coughed, she heard her mother come in and readjust the quilt, re-pin the flannel, and feel her forehead. Now, when she thinks of autumn, she thinks of "somebody with hands who does not want me to die."

She also remembers that Mr. Henry came in the autumn. They overheard their mother discussing the idea of renting a room to a roomer. Mr. Henry had been living with Miss Della Jones, but she had become too senile to keep a good house. The neighbor women discuss Della Jones's bad luck. Her husband left her for another woman, Peggy, one of Old Slack Bessie's girls. He was said to give as a reason for leaving that he was tired of Miss Della's use of violet water as perfume. He wanted a woman to smell like a woman. After he left, Miss Della suffered several strokes and became senile.

The women add that all of Miss Della's people were not very bright. They remember grinning Hattie, Della's sister, who "wasn't never right" and they remember Aunt Julia, who still "trots" up and down Sixteenth Street talking to herself. The County would not take her in on the grounds that she was not harming anyone. The women laugh about how scared she makes them when they come upon her early in the morning.

Claudia and Frieda are washing Mason jars. They do not listen to the words of the conversation; they only

watch out for the voices.

The women hope no one will let them run around senile when they get old. One woman announces that Della's sister is coming from North Carolina to look after her. Another woman speculates that this sister only wants to get Della's house. The first woman scolds her for such an evil thought, but the second woman claims that Henry Washington said this sister has not seen Miss Della for fifteen years. The women say they always thought Henry would marry Miss Della. They discuss Henry's marriage history. He has never been married. They wonder if he is picky. Someone says he is just sensible. She claims he is a steady worker with quiet ways. They ask Claudia's mother how much money she is charging him. She answers, five dollars every two weeks. They agree this will help her a good deal.

Claudia thinks of their conversation as "a gently wicked dance sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires." The girls do not know the meaning of all their words, but they keep track of the "edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions."

Mr. Henry arrives at their house on Saturday night. He smells wonderful "like trees and lemon vanishing cream, and Nu Nile Hair Oil and flecks of Sen-Sen." Claudia remembers that she and her sister were never introduced to Mr. Henry, "merely pointed out," along with other household rooms and furnishings. They are surprised that he speaks to them. He calls them Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers. He plays a game with them, holding out a penny to give them and then making it disappear. Their mother and father look on amused.

Pecola Breedlove comes to stay with Claudia's family for a few days of foster care. Claudia's mother calls her a "case." The County has placed her there until her family is reunited. She sleeps with Claudia and Frieda. They hear their mother talking about that "old Dog Breedlove," Pecola's father, who had burned up their house, beaten up his wife, and ended up "outdoors." Claudia knows that being "outdoors" was the worse thing that could happen in life. All excess was warned against with the potential result of ending up outdoors. If a mother put her son outdoors, the people always felt sorry for the son. Being put outdoors meant having no where to go.

The African American community lived "on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment." They lead a "peripheral existence." The prospect of ending up outdoors bred in people a desire for property and ownership. Propertied African Americans spent all their time and money fixing up their property. Renting African Americans looked at the propertied yards and resolved to get a place of their own.

Cholly Breedlove was considered by the community to have put himself on a level with animals for putting his family outdoors. Mrs. Breedlove was temporarily staying with the woman for whom she worked. Sammy, Pecola's brother, was staying with family.

Pecola came with nothing, no clothes or even underwear. Claudia and Frieda enjoy having her to play with. She answered either indifferently or affirmatively all the girls' questions for what to do. Claudia watched her as she accepted a glass of milk and graham crackers from Frieda. Pecola admired the picture of Shirley Temple on the glass. She and Frieda discussed how cute Shirley Temple was. Claudia hated Shirley Temple and did so ever since she saw her in a movie dancing with Bojangles. For Claudia, Bojangles was her uncle, her daddy, her friend, and he should be dancing with her not the white girl.

Since Claudia is younger than Frieda and Pecola, she has not learned to like dolls. She began to hate white dolls one Christmas when she got a blue-eyed Baby Doll. She could tell the adults thought the doll was her fondest wish. She could not figure out what to do with the doll. She had no interest in acting like its mother. For her, motherhood was old age. She saw countless images in picture books of girls holding baby dolls. She was

especially repulsed by raggedy Ann dolls.

She hated sleeping with the doll; its body was unyielding. She only wanted to dismember it in order to find out what was so dear about it, "the desirability that had escaped me." She saw all the adults around her agreeing that the blue-eyed, pale-skinned dolls were what every girl should want. Adults used dolls as a bribe to be good. She dismembered the doll and looked at its insides. Adults would scold her and tell her they had always wanted but never got a baby doll. She wished someone would have asked her what she wanted for Christmas. It would not have been to own something, but to feel something. She would have wanted to sit on a low stool just the size for her size in the warmth of Big Mamma's kitchen and listen to Big Papa play his violin just for her. She would have engaged all her senses, the smell of lilacs, the taste of a peach, the sound of the music.

Instead she got a tea party set made of acrid smelling tin plates and cups or she got new dresses for which she had to have a hurried bath before wearing. Aside from dismembering white baby dolls, she also wanted to do the same to white girls. She wanted to discover "what eluded her." She wanted to know what made Black women look admiringly at them but not at her. When she pinched them, though, she found out it was repulsive to see them cry out in pain. Disinterested violence "was so abhorrent to her that she found refuge in fabricated love. She realized it was a small step to Shirley Temple."

Claudia and Frieda hear their mother complaining about Pecola having drank three quarts of milk. They know she loves to use the Shirley Temple cup and drinks at every opportunity. All three girls listen painfully, fidgeting, while she complains. Claudia and Frieda hate to hear her complaints. "They were interminable, insulting." She never named anyone, but the complaints were painful to hear. She went on and on until she was finished and then she would start singing and sing for the rest of the day. During her "fussing soliloquy," she reveals that no one has checked on Pecola. Cholly has been out of jail for two days and has not come by to check on her. Neither has Mrs. Breedlove. When their mother gets to Henry Ford, the girls know it is time to sneak outside. They sit on the porch steps.

It is a lonesome Saturday. Saturdays are "lonesome, fussy, soapy days." Only Sundays are worse because they are so full of "'don'ts' and 'set'cha self downs.'" If her mother was in a singing mood, Claudia liked these days. Her mother would sing the blues so longingly, Claudia found herself longing for those old days when no one had "a thin di-i-me to my name." Her mother's blues left her "with the conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet." However, this Saturday her mother was fussing, and it felt like someone was throwing stones at Claudia's head.

The girls on the porch try to think of something to do. Claudia suggests going up to Mr. Henry's room and looking at his pornographic magazines. Frieda does not want to. Claudia suggests threading noodles for a half-blind woman, but Frieda thinks her eyes look like snot. Pecola does not have any ideas. Claudia suggests looking in the trash cans in the alley for things. Again her idea is put down. Then she suggests going to the Greek hotel and listening to the men curse. When Frieda says she already knows all their words, Claudia gives up and examines the white spots on her fingernails; they signify the total number of boyfriends she will have.

Suddenly Pecola makes an alarmed sound. Blood is running down her legs. Frieda tells her it is "ministratin'." She assures Pecola that she will not die, that she can now have a baby. She runs upstairs and sends Claudia for water. Claudia goes into the kitchen where her mother is still fussing and asks for a glass of water. Her mother complains about it and tries to make her stand there and drink it, but Claudia manages to get outside. Outside, she finds Pecola crying. Frieda arrives and scolds Claudia for getting such a small amount of water for the task of cleaning the blood off the porch. She tells Claudia to clean it while she takes Pecola around the side of the house. Claudia does not want to miss seeing what happens so she sashes a little water on the blood and runs around to see Frieda helping Pecola out of her underwear. She throws them at Claudia and tells her to bury

them. Frieda pins a cotton pad to Pecola's dress.

When Claudia looks for something to bury the underwear with, she sees Rosemary hiding in the bushes watching. Rosemary yells for their mother, Mrs. MacTeer, telling her the girls are playing nasty. Their mother comes out yelling that she would rather raise pigs than nasty girls. She breaks off some twigs from a bush and grabs Frieda. She hits her several times. Claudia knows that Frieda is destroyed by whippings; they "wounded and insulted her." Their mother grabs for Pecola and the pin comes loose letting the pad fall. The girls manage to tell her they were helping Pecola because she had begun to bleed. She pulls the girls toward her with sorry eyes and tells them to stop crying. Mrs. MacTeer takes Pecola into the bathroom and runs a bath. Claudia asks Frieda if their mother is going to drown Pecola. Frieda calls her dumb. Claudia suggests going over and beating up Rosemary, but Frieda says they should leave her alone.

That night in bed, the girls treat Pecola with awe. Pecola asks if it is true she can have a baby now. She wants to know how and Frieda tells her somebody has to love her. Pecola is silent for a while and then asks how you get somebody to love you. Frieda had fallen asleep, and Claudia did not know.

Notes

Morrison here begins the structural principle of the novel--the seasons, beginning with autumn and ending with summer. Although other works of literature have used the seasons as markers of time, they usually begin in Spring, the time of beginnings. Beginning in Autumn, the time when plants go dormant, leaves begin to fall from trees, and the earth prepares for winter, strikes the reader as ominous. When we see the constrained lives of these children, we understand the reason for the ominous note.

In sharp contrast to the bright and happy green house of the Dick and Jane primer, Claudia and Frieda live in an old, cold green house, poorly insulated against the biting cold. Unlike Dick and Jane's smiling parents, Claudia and Frieda's father is mainly absent and their mother is too tired to be kind to her daughters. She blames Claudia for getting sick. There is some love in her mother's constant rough treatment of the girls, but the dominant note is meanness and anger. They have absolutely no voice in their family. They only listen silently while their mother calls them names, mainly "stupid." Adults treat them as inconvenient pieces of furniture.

Morrison moves outward in this chapter from the specific family of Claudia and Frieda to the larger African-American community in their neighborhood. She does this with the clever technique of an overheard conversation among adult women with Claudia and Frieda's as yet unnamed mother. These women talk about the character Miss Della, who has just lost a boarder, Mr. Henry, to Claudia's mother.

Mr. Henry comes with several smells. He smells like vanishing cream and hair oil among other things, both of which are products for changing the physical features of African Americans. Vanishing cream was used with the purpose of lightening the color of the skin and hair oil was used along with straightening agents to make the hair straight. Mr. Henry, the dandy of the novel, is a victim of internalized racism.

The women commiserate with Miss Della, but also gossip about her family's lack of intelligence and sanity. We get our first view of gender relations with Miss Della. Her husband seems to have left her for a prostitute for the flimsy reason that she smelled like perfume. The two ways to be a woman in this community are named--respectable women who go to church and sexually promiscuous women who do not. They seem to wage a fierce competition over who gets the men.

Pecola Breedlove is introduced in this chapter. She is a girl almost entirely without a voice and seemingly without a will of her own. She goes any way the other girls lead her. She voices no desires, but accepts what is given to her. She loves Shirley Temple to excess. She gets her period in this chapter, leading the reader to

assume that what we heard in chapter 2--that Pecola became pregnant by her father--occurs later in time. Pecola has been abandoned in this chapter. While her brother was taken in by family, she was left to the county to place in the grudging care of Mrs. MacTeer.

Morrison delays naming Claudia's mother until late in this chapter, when Rosemary calls her and tells her her daughters are playing nasty. She gives them no time for explanation before she applies vigorous and brutal corporal punishment. When she sees her mistake, she does not.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Pecola Breedlove - In portraying this young girl, Morrison is faced with the task of maintaining the sense of the child's innocence--that is, her acceptance of color ideology at face value--and demonstrate how that ideology destroys her. Pecola is presented always from a third person narrative point of view, either by the omniscient narrator or by the first person narrator, Claudia, until the last chapter of the novel, when she is given voice in a first person dialogue with her imaginary friend.

Pecola is first portrayed as she is seen by Claudia when she comes to live with the MacTeers as a "case" for charity. Pecola acquiesces to anything the girls want her to do. When she gets..... internalized racism to its own logical extreme.

Claudia MacTeer - Morrison uses Claudia as a narrator only sporadically in the novel. She comes in and out of voice. She is a better taken care of child than Pecola, but only one step up. That slight advantage gives Claudia the ability to fight back against the color ideology of white beauty/black ugliness. Her age also.....

Cholly Breedlove - Morrison is careful not to portray a simple villain in Cholly. By giving his traumatic experience with racism during his first sexual exploration, Morrison enables the reader to see how Cholly has been hurt. Her portraiture of Cholly, however, is not a central concern in

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The Bluest Eye has perhaps the least controlled plot of Morrison's novels. Because she chose to portray the ill effects on children of internalized racism, Morrison needed a child protagonist. However, she could not maintain the focus on Pecola Breedlove throughout the entire novel without demonizing Pecola's antagonists. Therefore, she needed to break the narrative unity of the novel to move.....

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

Toni Morrison intertwines the concerns of two main themes in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. She explores the tragedy of the oppression or violation of children, especially poor children and she explores a problem specific to groups targeted by racism, that of internalized racism. This is a kind of thinking produced when members of the targeted group, in this case African Americans, begin to believe the.....

STUDY QUESTIONS – BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. What are some of the sources of the value of white as beautiful and black as ugly, e.g. media, parent figures, etc.?
2. Choose one character and show how s/he has been hurt by racism in the society?.....

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