# THE BLUEST EYE

By Toni Morrison

## Key Facts

**FULL TITLE** · *The Bluest Eye*

**AUTHOR** · Toni Morrison

**TYPE OF WORK** · Novel

**GENRE** · Coming-of-age, tragedy, elegy

**LANGUAGE** · English

**TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN** · New York, 1962–1965

**NARRATOR** · There are two narrators: Claudia MacTeer, who narrates in a mixture of a child's and an adult's perspective; and an omniscient narrator.

**POINT OF VIEW** · Claudia's and Pecola's points of view are dominant, but we also see things from Cholly's, Pauline's, and other characters' points of view. Point of view is deliberately fragmented to give a sense of the characters' experiences of dislocation and to help us sympathize with multiple characters.

**TONE** · Lyrical, elegiac, embittered, matter-of-fact, colloquial

**TENSE** · Past, as seen by the adult Claudia

**SETTING (TIME)** · 1940–1941

**SETTING (PLACE)** · Lorain, Ohio

**PROTAGONIST** · Pecola Breedlove

**MAJOR CONFLICT** · Pecola needs to receive love from somebody, but her parents and the other members of her community are unable to love her because they have been damaged and thwarted in their own lives.

**RISING ACTION** · Cholly tries to burn down the family house; Pecola is snubbed by a grocer, tormented by boys, and blamed for killing a cat.

**CLIMAX** · Pecola's father rapes her.

**FALLING ACTION** · Pecola is beaten by her mother, requests blue eyes from Soaphead Church, begins to go mad, and loses her baby.

**THEMES** · Whiteness as the standard of beauty; seeing versus being seen; the power of stories; sexual initiation and abuse; satisfying appetites versus repressing them

**MOTIFS** · The Dick-and-Jane narrative; the seasons and nature; whiteness and color; eyes and vision; dirtiness and cleanliness

**SYMBOLS** · The house; bluest eyes; the marigolds

**FORESHADOWING** · The prologue foreshadows the major events of the plot.

## Context

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. Her mother's family had come to Ohio from Alabama via Kentucky, and her father had migrated from Georgia. Morrison grew up with a love of literature and received her undergraduate degree from Howard University. She received a master's degree from Cornell University, completing a thesis on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Afterward, she taught at Texas Southern University and then at Howard, in Washington, D.C., where she met Harold Morrison, an architect from Jamaica. The marriage lasted six years, and Morrison gave birth to two sons. She and her husband divorced while she was pregnant with her second son, and she returned to Lorain to give birth. She then moved to New York and became an editor at Random House, specializing in black fiction. During this difficult and somewhat lonely time, she began working on her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which was published in 1970.

Morrison's first novel was not an immediate success, but she continued to write. *Sula*, which appeared in 1973, was more successful, earning a nomination for the National Book Award. In 1977, *Song of Solomon* launched Morrison's national reputation, winning her the National Book Critics' Circle Award. Her most well-known work, *Beloved*, appeared in 1987 and won the Pulitzer Prize. Her other novels include *Tar Baby* (1981), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1998). Meanwhile, Morrison returned to teaching and was a professor at Yale and the State University of New York at Albany. Today, she is the Robert F. Goheen

Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton University, where she teaches creative writing. In 1993, Morrison became the first African-American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in literature.

*The Bluest Eye* contains a number of autobiographical elements. It is set in the town where Morrison grew up, and it is told from the point of view of a nine-year-old, the age Morrison would have been the year the novel takes place (1941). Like the MacTeer family, Morrison's family struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression. Morrison grew up listening to her mother singing and her grandfather playing the violin, just as Claudia does. In the novel's afterword, Morrison explains that the story developed out of a conversation she had had in elementary school with a little girl, who longed for blue eyes. She was still thinking about this conversation in the 1960s, when the Black is Beautiful movement was working to reclaim African-American beauty, and she began her first novel.

While its historical context is clear, the literary context of *The Bluest Eye* is more complex. Faulkner and Woolf, whose work Morrison knew well, influenced her style. She uses the modernist techniques of stream-of-consciousness, multiple perspectives, and deliberate fragmentation. But Morrison understands her work more fundamentally as part of a black cultural tradition and strives to create a distinctively black literature. Her prose is infused with black musical traditions such as the spirituals, gospel, jazz and the blues. She writes in a black vernacular, full of turns of phrase and figures of speech unique to the community in which she grew up, with the hope that if she is true to her own particular experience, it will be universally meaningful. In this way, she attempts to create what she calls a "race-specific yet race-free prose."

In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explains her goal in writing the novel. She wants to make a statement about the damage that internalized racism can do to the most vulnerable member of a community—a young girl. At the same time, she does not want to dehumanize the people who wound this girl, because that would simply repeat their mistake. Also, she wants to protect this girl from "the weight of the novel's inquiry," and thus decides to tell the story from multiple perspectives. In this way, as she puts it, she "shape[s] a silence while breaking it," keeping the girl's dignity intact.

## Plot Overview

Nine-year-old Claudia and ten-year-old Frieda MacTeer live in Lorain, Ohio, with their parents. It is the end of the Great Depression, and the girls' parents are more concerned with making ends meet than with lavishing attention upon their daughters, but there is an

undercurrent of love and stability in their home. The MacTeers take in a boarder, Henry Washington, and also a young girl named Pecola. Pecola's father has tried to burn down his family's house, and Claudia and Frieda feel sorry for her. Pecola loves Shirley Temple, believing that whiteness is beautiful and that she is ugly.

Pecola moves back in with her family, and her life is difficult. Her father drinks, her mother is distant, and the two of them often beat one another. Her brother, Sammy, frequently runs away. Pecola believes that if she had blue eyes, she would be loved and her life would be transformed. Meanwhile, she continually receives confirmation of her own sense of ugliness—the grocer looks right through her when she buys candy, boys make fun of her, and a light-skinned girl, Maureen, who temporarily befriends her makes fun of her too. She is wrongly blamed for killing a boy's cat and is called a "nasty little black bitch" by his mother.

We learn that Pecola's parents have both had difficult lives. Pauline, her mother, has a lame foot and has always felt isolated. She loses herself in movies, which reaffirm her belief that she is ugly and that romantic love is reserved for the beautiful. She encourages her husband's violent behavior in order to reinforce her own role as a martyr. She feels most alive when she is at work, cleaning a white woman's home. She loves this home and despises her own. Cholly, Pecola's father, was abandoned by his parents and raised by his great aunt, who died when he was a young teenager. He was humiliated by two white men who found him having sex for the first time and made him continue while they watched. He ran away to find his father but was rebuffed by him. By the time he met Pauline, he was a wild and rootless man. He feels trapped in his marriage and has lost interest in life.

Cholly returns home one day and finds Pecola washing dishes. With mixed motives of tenderness and hatred that are fueled by guilt, he rapes her. When Pecola's mother finds her unconscious on the floor, she disbelieves Pecola's story and beats her. Pecola goes to Soaphead Church, a sham mystic, and asks him for blue eyes. Instead of helping her, he uses her to kill a dog he dislikes.

Claudia and Frieda find out that Pecola has been impregnated by her father, and unlike the rest of the neighborhood, they want the baby to live. They sacrifice the money they have been saving for a bicycle and plant marigold seeds. They believe that if the flowers live, so will Pecola's baby. The flowers refuse to bloom, and Pecola's baby dies when it is born prematurely. Cholly, who rapes Pecola a second time and then runs away, dies in a workhouse. Pecola goes mad, believing that her cherished wish has been fulfilled and that she has the bluest eyes.

# Character List

**Pecola Breedlove -** The protagonist of the novel, an eleven-year-old black girl who believes that she is ugly and that having blue eyes would make her beautiful. Sensitive and delicate, she passively suffers the abuse of her mother, father, and classmates. She is lonely and imaginative.

Pecola is the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye,* but despite this central role she is passive and remains a mysterious character. Morrison explains in her novel's afterword that she purposely tells Pecola's story from other points of view to keep Pecola's dignity and, to some extent, her mystery intact. She wishes to prevent us from labeling Pecola or prematurely believing that we understand her. Pecola is a fragile and delicate child when the novel begins, and by the novel's close, she has been almost completely destroyed by violence. At the beginning of the novel, two desires form the basis of her emotional life: first, she wants to learn how to get people to love her; second, when forced to witness her parents' brutal fights, she simply wants to disappear. Neither wish is granted, and Pecola is forced further and further into her fantasy world, which is her only defense against the pain of her existence. She believes that being granted the blue eyes that she wishes for would change both how others see her and what she is forced to see. At the novel's end, she delusively believes that her wish has been granted, but only at the cost of her sanity. Pecola's fate is a fate worse than death because she is not allowed any release from her world—she simply moves to "the edge of town, where you can see her even now."

Pecola is also a symbol of the black community's self-hatred and belief in its own ugliness. Others in the community, including her mother, father, and Geraldine, act out their own self-hatred by expressing hatred toward her. At the end of the novel, we are told that Pecola has been a scapegoat for the entire community. Her ugliness has made them feel beautiful, her suffering has made them feel comparatively lucky, and her silence has given them the opportunity for speaking. But because she continues to live after she has lost her mind, Pecola's aimless wandering at the edge of town haunts the community, reminding them of the ugliness and hatred that they have tried to repress. She becomes a reminder of human cruelty and an emblem of human suffering.

**Claudia MacTeer -** The narrator of parts of the novel. An independent and strong-minded nine-year-old, Claudia is a fighter and rebels against adults' tyranny over children and against the black community's idealization of white beauty standards. She has not yet learned the self-hatred that plagues her peers.

Claudia narrates parts of *The Bluest Eye,* sometimes from a child's perspective and sometimes from the perspective of an adult looking back. Like Pecola, Claudia suffers from racist beauty standards and material insecurity, but she has a loving and stable family, which makes all the difference for her. Whereas Pecola is passive when she is abused, Claudia is a fighter. When Claudia is given a white doll she does not want, she dissects and destroys it. When she finds a group of boys harassing Pecola, she attacks them. When she learns that Pecola is pregnant, she and her sister come up with a plan to save Pecola's baby from the community's rejection. Claudia explains that she is brave because she has not yet learned her limitations—most important, she has not learned the self-hatred that plagues so many adults in the community.

Claudia is a valuable guide to the events that unfold in Lorain because her life is stable enough to permit her to see clearly. Her vision is not blurred by the pain that eventually drives Pecola into madness. Her presence in the novel reminds us that most black families are not like Pecola's; most black families pull together in the face of hardship instead of fall apart. Claudia's perspective is also valuable because it melds the child's and the adult's points of view. Her childish viewpoint makes her uniquely qualified to register what Pecola experiences, but her adult viewpoint can correct the childish one when it is incomplete. She is a messenger of suffering but also of hope.

**Cholly Breedlove** - Pecola's father, who is impulsive and violent—free, but in a dangerous way. Having suffered early humiliations, he takes out his frustration on the women in his life. He is capable of both tenderness and rage, but as the story unfolds, rage increasingly dominates.

By all rights, we should hate Cholly Breedlove, given that he rapes his daughter. But Morrison explains in her afterword that she did not want to dehumanize her characters, even those who dehumanize one another, and she succeeds in making Cholly a sympathetic figure. He has experienced genuine suffering, having been abandoned in a junk heap as a baby and having suffered humiliation at the hands of white men. He is also capable of pleasure and even joy, in the experience of eating a watermelon or touching a girl for the first time. He is capable of violence, but he is also vulnerable, as when two white men violate him by forcing him to perform sexually for their amusement and when he defecates in his pants after encountering his father. Cholly represents a negative form of freedom. He is not free to love and be loved or to enjoy full dignity, but he is free to have sex and fight and even kill; he is free to be indifferent to death. He falls apart when this freedom becomes a complete lack of interest in life, and he reaches for his daughter to remind himself that he is alive.

**Pauline (Polly) Breedlove** - Pecola's mother, who believes that she is ugly; this belief has made her lonely and cold. She has a deformed foot and sees herself as the martyr of a terrible

marriage. She finds meaning not in her own family but in romantic movies and in her work caring for a well-to-do white family.

Like Cholly, Pauline inflicts a great deal of pain on her daughter but Morrison nevertheless renders her sympathetically. She experiences more subtle forms of humiliation than Cholly does—her lame foot convinces her that she is doomed to isolation, and the snobbery of the city women in Lorain condemns her to loneliness. In this state, she is especially vulnerable to the messages conveyed by white culture—that white beauty and possessions are the way to happiness. Once, at the movies, she fixes her hair like the white sex symbol Jean Harlow and loses her tooth while eating candy. Though her fantasy of being like Harlow is a failure, Pauline finds another fantasy world—the white household for which she cares. This fantasy world is more practical than her imitation of Hollywood actresses and is more socially sanctioned than the madness of Pecola's fantasy world, but it is just as effective in separating her from the people—her family—she should love. In a sense, Pauline's existence is just as haunted and delusional as her daughter's.

**Frieda MacTeer** - Claudia's ten-year-old sister, who shares Claudia's independence and stubbornness. Because she is closer to adolescence, Frieda is more vulnerable to her community's equation of whiteness with beauty. Frieda is more knowledgeable about the adult world and sometimes braver than Claudia.

**Mrs. MacTeer** - Claudia's mother, an authoritarian and sometimes callous woman who nonetheless steadfastly loves and protects her children. She is given to fussing aloud and to singing the blues.

**Mr. MacTeer** - Claudia's father, who works hard to keep the family fed and clothed. He is fiercely protective of his daughters.

**Henry Washington** - The MacTeers' boarder, who has a reputation for being a steady worker and a quiet man. Middle-aged, he has never married and has a lecherous side.

**Sammy Breedlove** - Pecola's fourteen-year-old brother, who copes with his family's problems by running away from home. His active response contrasts with Pecola's passivity.

**China, Poland, Miss Marie** - The local whores, Miss Marie (also known as the Maginot Line) is fat and affectionate, China is skinny and sarcastic, and Poland is quiet. They live above the Breedlove apartment and befriend Pecola.

**Mr. Yacobowski** - The local grocer, a middle-aged white immigrant. He has a gruff manner toward little black girls.

**Rosemary Villanucci** - A white, comparatively wealthy girl who lives next door to the MacTeers. She makes fun of Claudia and Frieda and tries to get them into trouble, and they sometimes beat her up.

**Maureen Peal** - A light-skinned, wealthy black girl who is new at the local school. She accepts everyone else's assumption that she is superior and is capable of both generosity and cruelty.

**Geraldine** - A middle-class black woman who, though she keeps house flawlessly and diligently cares for the physical appearances of herself and her family (including her husband, Louis, and her son, Junior), is essentially cold. She feels real affection only for her cat.

**Junior** - Geraldine's son, who, in the absence of genuine affection from his mother, becomes cruel and sadistic. He tortures the family cat and harasses children who come to the nearby playground.

**Soaphead Church** - Born Elihue Micah Whitcomb, he is a light-skinned West Indian misanthrope and self-declared "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams." He hates all kinds of human touch, with the exception of the bodies of young girls. He is a religious hypocrite.

**Aunt Jimmy** - The elderly woman who raises Cholly. She is affectionate but physically in decay.

**Samson Fuller** - Cholly's father, who abandoned Cholly's mother when she got pregnant. He lives in Macon, Georgia, and is short, balding, and mean.

**Blue Jack** - A co-worker and friend of Cholly's during his boyhood. He is a kind man and excellent storyteller.

**M'Dear** - A quiet, elderly woman who serves as a doctor in the community where Cholly grows up. She is tall and impressive, and she carries a hickory stick.

**Darlene** - The first girl that Cholly likes. She is pretty, playful and affectionate.

## Analysis of Major Characters

### *Pecola Breedlove*

Pecola is the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, but despite this central role she is passive and remains a mysterious character. Morrison explains in her novel's afterword that she purposely tells Pecola's story from other points of view to keep Pecola's dignity and, to some extent, her mystery intact. She wishes to prevent us from labeling Pecola or prematurely believing that we understand her. Pecola is a fragile and delicate child when the novel begins, and by the novel's close, she has been almost completely destroyed by violence. At the beginning of the novel, two desires form the basis of her emotional life: first, she wants to learn how to get

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## Themes, Motifs and Symbols

# Themes

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

## Whiteness as the Standard of Beauty

*The Bluest Eye* provides an extended depiction of the ways in which internalized white beauty standards deform the lives of black girls and women. Implicit messages that whiteness is superior are everywhere, including the white baby doll given to Claudia, the idealization of Shirley Temple, the consensus that light-skinned Maureen is cuter than the other black girls, the idealization of white beauty in the movies, and Pauline Breedlove's preference for the little white girl she works for over her daughter. Adult women, having learned to hate the blackness of their own bodies, take this hatred out on their children—Mrs. Breedlove shares the conviction that Pecola is ugly, and lighter-skinned Geraldine curses Pecola's blackness. Claudia remains free from this worship of whiteness, imagining Pecola's unborn baby as beautiful in its blackness. But it is hinted that once Claudia reaches adolescence, she too will learn to hate herself, as if racial self-loathing were a necessary part of maturation.

The person who suffers most from white beauty standards is, of course, Pecola. She connects beauty with being loved and believes that if she possesses blue eyes, the cruelty in her life will be replaced by affection and respect. This hopeless desire leads ultimately to madness, suggesting that the fulfillment of the wish for white beauty may be even more tragic than the wish impulse itself.

## Seeing versus Being Seen

Pecola's desire for blue eyes, while highly unrealistic, is based on one correct insight into her world: she believes that the cruelty she witnesses and experiences is connected to how she is seen. If she had beautiful blue eyes, Pecola imagines, people would not want to do ugly things in front of her or to her. The accuracy of this insight is affirmed by her experience of being teased by the boys—when Maureen comes to her rescue, it seems that they no longer want to behave badly under Maureen's attractive gaze. In a more basic sense, Pecola and her family are mistreated in part because they happen to have black skin. By wishing for blue eyes rather than lighter skin, Pecola indicates that she wishes to see things differently as much as she wishes to be seen differently. She can only receive this wish, in effect, by blinding herself. Pecola is then able to see herself as beautiful, but only at the cost of her ability to see accurately both herself and the world around her. The connection between how one is seen and what one sees has a uniquely tragic outcome for her.

## The Power of Stories

*The Bluest Eye* is not one story, but multiple, sometimes contradictory, interlocking stories. Characters tell stories to make sense of their lives, and these stories have tremendous power for both good and evil. Claudia's stories, in particular, stand out for their affirmative power. First and foremost, she tells Pecola's story, and though she questions the accuracy and meaning of her version, to some degree her attention and care redeem the ugliness of Pecola's life. Furthermore, when the adults describe Pecola's pregnancy and hope that the baby dies, Claudia and Frieda attempt to rewrite this story as a hopeful one, casting themselves as saviors. Finally, Claudia resists the premise of white superiority, writing her own story about the beauty of blackness. Stories by other characters are often destructive to themselves and others. The story Pauline Breedlove tells herself about her own ugliness reinforces her self-hatred, and the story she tells herself about her own martyrdom reinforces her cruelty toward her family. Soaphead Church's personal narratives about his good intentions and his special relationship with God are pure hypocrisy. Stories are as likely to distort the truth as they are to reveal it. While Morrison apparently believes that stories can be redeeming, she is no blind optimist and refuses to let us rest comfortably in any one version of what happens.

### Satisfying Appetites versus Suppressing Them

A number of characters in *The Bluest Eye* define their lives through a denial of their bodily needs. Geraldine prefers cleanliness and order to the messiness of sex, and she is emotionally frigid as a result. Similarly, Pauline prefers cleaning and organizing the home of her white employers to expressing physical affection toward her family. Soaphead Church finds physicality distasteful, and this peculiarity leads to his preference for objects over humans and to his perverse attraction to little girls. In contrast, when characters experience happiness, it is generally in viscerally physical terms. Claudia prefers to have her senses indulged by wonderful scents, sounds, and tastes than to be given a hard white doll. Cholly's greatest moments of happinesses are eating the best part of a watermelon and touching a girl for the first time. Pauline's happiest memory is of sexual fulfillment with her husband. The novel suggests that, no matter how messy and sometimes violent human desire is, it is also the source of happiness: denial of the body begets hatred and violence, not redemption.

## *Motifs*

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.*

### The Dick-and-Jane Narrative

The novel opens with a narrative from a Dick-and-Jane reading primer, a narrative that is distorted when Morrison runs its sentences and then its words together. The gap between the idealized, sanitized, upper-middle-class world of Dick and Jane (who we *assume* to be white, though we are never told so) and the often dark and ugly world of the novel is emphasized by the chapter headings excerpted from the primer. But Morrison does not mean for us to think that the Dick-and-Jane world is better—in fact, it is largely because the black characters have internalized white Dick-and-Jane values that they are unhappy. In this way, the Dick and Jane narrative and the novel provide ironic commentary on each other.

## The Seasons and Nature

The novel is divided into the four seasons, but it pointedly refuses to meet the expectations of these seasons. For example, spring, the traditional time of rebirth and renewal, reminds Claudia of being whipped with new switches, and it is the season when Pecola's is raped. Pecola's baby dies in autumn, the season of harvesting. Morrison uses natural cycles to underline the unnaturalness and misery of her characters' experiences. To some degree, she also questions the benevolence of nature, as when Claudia wonders whether "the earth itself might have been unyielding" to someone like Pecola.

### Whiteness and Color

In the novel, whiteness is associated with beauty and cleanliness (particularly according to Geraldine and Mrs. Breedlove), but also with sterility. In contrast, color is associated with happiness, most clearly in the rainbow of yellow, green, and purple memories Pauline Breedlove sees when making love with Cholly. Morrison uses this imagery to emphasize the destructiveness of the black community's privileging of whiteness and to suggest that vibrant color, rather than the pure absence of color, is a stronger image of happiness and freedom.

## Eyes and Vision

Pecola is obsessed with having blue eyes because she believes that this mark of conventional, white beauty will change the way that she is seen and therefore the way that she sees the world. There are continual references to other characters' eyes as well—for example, Mr. Yacobowski's hostility to Pecola resides in the blankness in his own eyes, as well as in his inability to see a black girl. This motif underlines the novel's repeated concern for the difference between how we see and how we are seen, and the difference between superficial sight and true insight.

## Dirtiness and Cleanliness

The black characters in the novel who have internalized white, middle-class values are obsessed with cleanliness. Geraldine and Mrs. Breedlove are excessively concerned with housecleaning—though Mrs. Breedlove cleans only the house of her white employers, as if the Breedlove apartment is beyond her help. This fixation on cleanliness extends into the women's moral and emotional quests for purity, but the obsession with domestic and moral sanitation leads them to cruel coldness. In contrast, one mark of Claudia's strength of character is her pleasure in her own dirt, a pleasure that represents self-confidence and a correct understanding of the nature of happiness.

## *Symbols*

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

### The House

The novel begins with a sentence from a Dick-and-Jane narrative: "Here is the house." Homes not only indicate socioeconomic status in this novel, but they also symbolize the emotional situations and values of the characters who inhabit them. The Breedlove apartment is miserable and decrepit, suffering from Mrs. Breedlove's preference for her employer's home over her own and symbolizing the misery of the Breedlove family. The MacTeer house is drafty and dark, but it is carefully tended by Mrs. MacTeer and, according to Claudia, filled with love, symbolizing that family's comparative cohesion.

### Bluest Eye(s)

To Pecola, blue eyes symbolize the beauty and happiness that she associates with the white, middle-class world. They also come to symbolize her own blindness, for she gains blue eyes only at the cost of her sanity. The "bluest" eye could also mean the saddest eye. Furthermore, *eye* puns on *I,* in the sense that the novel's title uses the singular form of the noun (instead of *The Bluest Eyes*) to express many of the characters' sad isolation.

### The Marigolds

Claudia and Frieda associate marigolds with the safety and well-being of Pecola's baby. Their ceremonial offering of money and the remaining unsold marigold seeds represents an honest sacrifice on their part. They believe that if the marigolds they have planted grow, then Pecola's baby will be all right. More generally, marigolds represent the constant renewal of nature. In Pecola's case, this cycle of renewal is perverted by her father's rape of her.

# Important Quotations Explained

## 1.

*"It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair."*

This quotation is from the second prologue to the novel, in which Claudia anticipates the events that the novel will recount, most notably Pecola's pregnancy by incest. Here, she remembers that she and Frieda blamed each other for the failure of the marigolds to grow one summer, but now she wonders if the earth itself was hostile to them—a darker, more radical possibility. The idea of blame is important because the book continually raises the question of who is to blame for Pecola's suffering. Are Claudia and Frieda at fault for not doing more to help Pecola? To some degree, we can blame Pecola's suffering on her parents and on racism; but Cholly and Pauline have themselves suffered, and the causes of suffering seem so diffuse and prevalent that it seems possible that life on earth itself is hostile to human happiness. This hostility is what the earth's hostility to the marigolds represents. The complexity of the question of blame increases when Claudia makes the stunning parallel between the healing action of their planting of the marigold seeds and Cholly's hurtful action of raping Pecola. Claudia suggests that the impulse that drove her and her sister and the impulse that drove Cholly might not be so different after all. Motives of innocence and faith seem to be no more effective than motives of lust and despair in the universe of the novel.

## 2.

*It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.*

These lines, which introduce Pecola's desire for blue eyes, are found in Chapter 3 of the "Autumn" section of the novel. They demonstrate the complexity of Pecola's desire—she does not want blue eyes simply because they conform to white beauty standards, but because she wishes to possess different sights and pictures, as if changing eye color will change reality. Pecola has just been forced to witness a violent fight between her parents, and the only solution she can imagine to her passive suffering is to witness something different. She believes that if she had blue eyes, their beauty would inspire beautiful and kindly behavior on the part of others. Pecola's desire has its own logic even if it is naïve. To Pecola, the color of one's skin and eyes do influence how one is treated and what one is forced to witness.

## 3.

*We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody, considered all speech a code to be broken by us, and all gestures subject to careful analysis; we had become headstrong, devious, and arrogant. Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. Our limitations were not known to us—not then.*

This quotation is from Claudia, and it occurs in the second-to-last chapter of the novel. It can be read as a concise description of Claudia and Frieda's ethos as a whole. The MacTeer girls take an active stance against whatever they perceive threatens them, whether it is a white doll, boys making fun of Pecola, Henry's molestation of Frieda, or the community's rejection of Pecola. Their active and energetic responses contrast sharply with Pecola's passive suffering. Though Claudia and Frieda's actions are childish and often doomed to failure, they are still examples of vigorous responses to oppression. Claudia hints here, however, that this willingness to take action no matter who defies them disappears with adulthood. Frieda and Claudia are able to be active in part because they are protected by their parents, and in part because they do not confront the life-or-death problems that Pecola does. As adults, they will learn to respond to antagonism in more indirect and perhaps more self-destructive ways.

## 4.

*The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us.*

This quotation, from the last chapter of the novel, sums up Claudia's impressions of Pecola's madness. Here, she transforms Pecola into a symbol of the beauty and suffering that marks all human life and into a more specific symbol of the hopes and fears of her community. The community has dumped all of its "waste" on Pecola because she is a convenient scapegoat. The blackness and ugliness that the other members of the community fear reside in themselves can instead be attributed to her. But Claudia also describes Pecola as the paragon of beauty, a startling claim after all the emphasis on Pecola's ugliness. Pecola is beautiful because she is human, but this beauty is invisible to the members of the community who have identified beauty with whiteness. She gives others beauty because their assumptions about her ugliness make them feel beautiful in comparison. In this sense, Pecola's gift of beauty is ironic—she gives people beauty because they think she is ugly, not because they perceive her true beauty as a human being.

## 5.

*Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never*

*safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye.*

This quotation is from the last chapter of the novel, in which Claudia attempts to tell us what her story means. It describes love as a potentially damaging force, following the suggestion that Cholly was the only person who loved Pecola "enough to touch her." If love and rape cannot be distinguished, then we have entered a world in which love itself is ambiguous. Against the usual idea that love is inherently healing and redemptive, Claudia suggests that love is only as good as the lover. This is why the broken, warped human beings in this novel fail to love one another well. In fact, Claudia suggests, love may even be damaging, because it locks the loved one in a potentially destructive gaze. Romantic love creates a damaging demand for beauty—the kind of beauty that black girls, by definition, may never be able to possess because of the racist standards of their society. But the pessimism of this passage is offset by the inherent hopefulness of the idea of love. If we can understand Cholly's behavior as driven by love as well as anger (and his rape of Pecola is in fact described in these terms), then there is still some good in him, however deformed. We are left to hope for a kind of love that is a genuine gift for the beloved.

## Narration: Narrator's point of view

### First Person (Central Narrator)

Claudia provides the bulk of the narration in the book. This is convenient because she actually witnessed what happened to Pecola as well as the way the town spoke about her, and she makes sure to include snatches of these conversations in her narration.

Claudia narrates her story from two different perspectives. In the Prologue and final chapter, the adult Claudia uses the past tense to describe events that happened back in 1941 in Lorain. But for the bulk of her narration, Claudia uses the present tense to describe these events, which has the effect of showing us things through her 9-year-old eyes.

Occasionally Claudia will move between the two modes, allowing us to see how she is reflecting on her own experience and highlighting the act of narration. Claudia is a highly empathetic narrator, and while she doesn't have access to the minds of the people she describes, she does her best to try to understand them, especially Pecola.

## Third Person (Omniscient)

In the chapters that deal with the Breedloves and the one featuring Soaphead Church, the narrator isn't Claudia, but rather a third-person omniscient narrator. This speaker is capable of moving through extreme distances of space and time. This is the voice that tells us the long history of the Breedloves' storefront, details Cholly's early sexual humiliation, and recounts Soaphead's journey from the West Indies to America.

The third-person style is useful in a book with so many complex characters. It allows us to watch their lives unfold over time, in ways we could never do if Claudia were the sole narrator.

# Genre

### African-American Modernist Fiction

The influence of Modernism on Morrison's work cannot be stressed enough. Morrison wrote her Master's thesis on Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner – two of the most important figures of British and American Modernism, respectively. Their influence can be seen in the form of the novel, which features the multiple perspectives and stream-of-consciousness so typical of modernist works. We might even think of Pecola's split psyche at the end of the novel as something that marks her as a subject in the modern world. The novel also takes up some of Modernism's thematic concerns, including the breakdown of the modern family, the dissolving of community, and an increasing skepticism about religion.

What distinguishes Morrison's work from those of her idols, though, is the way she combines Modernist form and content with distinctly African-American elements, such as old blues lyrics, black southern dialect, and narration from the point of view of African-American characters. This puts Morrison in another literary tradition as well – that of black Modernists such as Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Nella Larsen.

# Tone

## Sympathetic, Poetic, Philosophical

Both Claudia and the third-person narrator are deeply sympathetic. Claudia insists that Cholly loved Pecola even though he raped her, and the third-person narrator provides Cholly's back-story not to let him off the hook, but to complicate his personality and try to show us how the rape fit into the context of his life.

The book is also deeply poetic, featuring long, elegant descriptive passages about immaterial things like love:

*Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it – taste it – sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base – everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and*

*when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence in my throat*. (1.1.10)

The novel is also philosophical. It features multiple aphorisms – short maxims about life – such as: "Love is never any better than the lover" (4.11.8).

# Writing Style

## Lyrical and Featuring Multiple Perspectives

Morrison is famous for her use of fragmented narrative with multiple perspectives. Her use of different narrative styles – alternating between first- and third-person omniscient – gives her the freedom to do two interesting things. On the one hand, she uses Claudia to convey the thoughts and perceptions of a 9-year-old girl, giving the novel an aspect of innocence. On the other hand, the use of third-person omniscient narration allows the novel to cover broad sweeps of time and space – like when we get the history of the Breedloves' storefront or stories about Soaphead Church's white ancestors. This opens the novel up, giving it historical depth, and allowing us to see how the racial issues of the past are still impacting these characters in the 20th century.

Sometimes the contrast between speakers is particularly vivid. For example, during Pauline's story, the narration begins in third-person omniscient. Suddenly, about three pages in, we get a series of paragraphs from Pauline's perspective. One minute we're reading a lyrical line about how Pauline "saw the Kentucky sun drenching the yellow, heavy-lidded eyes of Cholly Breedlove" (3.7.10). The next minute we're immersed in Pauline's own Southern dialect as she says, "When I first seed Cholly...it was like all the bits of color from that time down home when all us chil'ren went berry picking after a funeral" (3.7.10). This makes the narrative more inclusive, giving rural, less-educated characters the opportunity to describe their own experience in their own language.