

# Bloom's Literature

## How to Write about *Bluest Eye*

### Reading to Write

Toni Morrison's first novel continues to fascinate its readers. It appears on many college syllabi, and remains a staple for discussion and essay topics at the high school and college level. Interest in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) persists because of the timelessness of the multiple plots and characters, the spectacular language and imagery, and the sophisticated narrative that showcases various shifts in point of view. Thematic issues that Morrison's characters face such as domestic violence and self-hatred are found in any racial group or time period; however, these perennial conflicts are mostly generated by the pervasive racism of that specific historical time. The multiple characters whose voices we hear engage us and provide us with a rich, multi-layered narrative to interpret in essays.

In her afterword in 1993, Morrison claims that *The Bluest Eye* is "the public exposure of a private confidence" (214). A writer could utilize Morrison's statement as an entry point into the text by exploring the many instances of personal events that characters experience and/or divulge to the reader. One example of a shameful event is Samson Fuller's stunning rejection of his son, Charles "Cholly" Breedlove. Cholly runs away from home after the death of his Aunt Jimmy, in search of his father who left before he was born; he finds him gambling in Macon and is destroyed by his father's ruthless hostility.

The man was impatient. "Something wrong with your head? Who told you to come after me?"  
... he stood up and in a vexed and whiny voice shouted at Cholly, "Tell that bitch she get her money. Now get the fuck outta my face!"  
... Cholly sat down on [the sidewalk]. The sunshine dropped like honey on his head.... If he sat very still, he thought, and kept his eyes on one thing, the tears would not come.... While straining in this way ... his bowels suddenly opened up, and before he could realize what he knew, liquid stools were running down his legs. At the mouth of the alley where his father was, on an orange crate in the sun, on a street full of grown men and women, he had soiled himself like a baby (157).

A close reading of a substantial passage such as this one can uncover various topics to consider examining further in an essay. Starting with the betrayal itself, one can begin to piece together Cholly's unfortunate childhood and maybe start to understand his terrible treatment of his own family. He is, of course, responsible for his dire actions later on in life, but the reader can get a sense of the way Cholly's spirit is broken as a child. At a time when Cholly is highly vulnerable (the sole parental figure in his life, Aunt Jimmy, has recently died, and Cholly is left all alone) he sets out to avert his impending fate, believing Darlene may be pregnant, and ends up psychologically bruised by his father. He believes his father may have some answers for him, since—years before—his father abandoned his mother while she was pregnant. His childlike belief that finding his father is the answer to his predicament is even more pathetic because Cholly really is all alone in the world with no concrete details about his father, except that he is in Macon. The reader may suspect that Cholly cannot possibly find his father, but incredibly, he finds him quite swiftly. Sadly, Cholly's father is more concerned about his gambling than his own son which illustrates one of the many themes found in the novel—people's desire to avoid poverty. Samson Fuller's one reference to Cholly's beloved Aunt Jimmy is to call her a bitch, and he removes himself from any parenting responsibility because he claims that he has already sent her some money.

This passage also raises central themes that you may want to write about—belonging and abandonment. Cholly, for example, is left with no one who wants to claim him as his or her own. He is now "[d]angerously free.... free to drink himself into a silly helplessness" (159), which he does as an adult, maybe to escape the painful memories of being discarded by his father. Central to his being abandoned is the physical state he finds himself in. He defecates on himself, and sits in his own stench for hours; no one comes to help, and he would probably repel people, as they may mistake him for an alcoholic, which ironically becomes his fate later on in his life.

Being physically desirable to others is another core issue and related theme that Morrison tackles in the book, and is central to this passage. Cholly is unwanted and physically repulsive to the outside world. This theme of perceived ugliness can be applied to almost every character we meet in the novel. The language used to describe Cholly's predicament is noteworthy. Two similes are

used—the sun is like honey, and seems to conjure up a sense of his being soothed and loved by the universe, and he is like a baby who has dirtied his diaper, but without a parent to care for him and caress him, the way the sun does. Morrison divulges to the world the effects of Cholly's painful moment of shame, which reverberates throughout the text and touches other characters' lives.

*The Bluest Eye* is often noted as the most accessible of Toni Morrison's novels, but a writer still has to take the time to reread the text and to delve deeper into the issues raised by certain character's actions, such as child neglect and abuse. Being an active reader—one who asks questions of the text and engages with the text at all levels—helps when transferring ideas about the novel to the page. There are many approaches to the novel, and the vast amount of scholarship on the book has a lot to offer any writer who wants to carefully consider the ideas in the text.

## Topics and Strategies

Here you will find a variety of topics to consider. It is up to you to interpret the events and characters in the novel in an original way. Doing your own research can help you to situate some of the occurrences in the novel into historical context and can also help you to devise a unique approach to the novel.

### Themes

Many themes in the book are central to character development, so an exploration of themes in *The Bluest Eye* may well be connected to an exploration of a number of characters' lives. A writer might want to start by locating and identifying an idea in the novel and following that idea throughout the novel, noting its impact on character development. For example, early on in the book, the reader comes to understand that beauty is important to Pecola and other characters. That theme can be followed and connected not only to the character's beliefs about beauty but to the role society plays in personal reflections about beauty and worthiness. Although this book is narrated by a child and focuses in depth on another child's life, it is not a children's book; the themes are mature and complex and worthy of further investigation. Once you have identified a theme, decide what the novel is saying about it. Innocence and the corruption of innocents in the novel is a major theme. Go further than simply identifying the theme by perhaps asking who is responsible for protecting the innocent members of society and if anyone in the novel effectively protects vulnerable characters.

### Sample Topics:

1. **Perceptions of ideal beauty and ugliness:** In what way is this novel a commentary on beauty and ugliness and people's commonly warped perceptions of both?

"Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed towards petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them" (38). An essay on beauty could begin with an analysis of this powerful summation of the self-loathing that Pecola Breedlove is mired in. Characters other than Pecola also struggle with their physical appearance and could be carefully analyzed.

2. **The innocence of childhood and coming of age:** Think about how childhood is represented in the novel. How do the interactions between Claudia MacTeer and her sister Frieda contribute to the themes of the novel and of what it means to be a child?

Writing about childhood may include how the narrator Claudia and her sister Frieda try to make sense of their world; as they listen to the adults around them, they must "listen for truth in timbre" (11). Their childlike perspective on the world is instantly recognizable, for example, when Claudia "began to concentrate on the white spots on [her] fingernails. The total signified the number of boyfriends [she] would have. Seven" (27). Moments like this one, where the narrator makes sense of her life in childlike ways can be read in contrast to the many cases of child abuse, a theme detailed below.

3. **Child abuse/incest:** What leads to child abuse and/or incest in the book? What motivations does Morrison provide for the characters' despicable actions?

An essay focused on the novel's abuse might allow you to analyze characters who are not as obvious as others. Two secondary characters with whom Pecola comes in contact—Geraldine, "the pretty lady" (94), and Elihue "Soaphead Church" Micah Whitcomb—have lasting effects on her self-esteem, and represent adults with the ability to irrevocably

damage children. These and other instances of blatant or subtle exploitation could be systematically examined.

## Character

Luckily for the reader, Morrison fully develops many characters in this novel, which means that you are not restricted to examining only one or two "main" characters. A detailed essay could be written about almost every character that appears in the book, including those on the periphery. The book is decidedly character driven, but characters and their actions are closely connected to the themes and comments that Morrison makes about society and human behavior. The novel illuminates the damaging effects of society on the individual and holds many accountable for people's suffering: institutionalized racism, ill-equipped parents, and malevolent personalities.

### Sample Topics:

1. **Pecola Breedlove's character:** Why is Pecola Breedlove so consumed by a conscious and unconscious self-hatred?

To begin to consider writing about Pecola, one could turn to the fact that, in the novel, her name references the character Peola Johnson, the light-skinned daughter of housekeeper Delilah Johnson in the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*, who resents her mother's dark skin and eventually passes for white. The tragedy in Pecola Breedlove's mind would be that she cannot possibly pass for white or for someone who is, she believes, truly beautiful.

2. **Minor characters:** Examine the role of three minor characters in the novel.

Minor characters such as Geraldine, Elihue "Soaphead Church" Micah Whitcomb, Mr. Yacobowski, and the prostitutes (China, Poland, and Miss Marie) all play substantial roles in Pecola's life. Morrison also uses these characters to extend the scope of the novel. Soaphead Church's part in the novel includes a letter that he writes to God, which adds another dimension to the narrative. The letter provides insight into the mind of a child molester whose horrific acts leave us dumbfounded. What does Morrison's inclusion of this character add to the themes of the novel?

3. **Charles "Cholly" Breedlove's character:** Cholly Breedlove's character is multifaceted and his actions are chilling and disturbing. How does Morrison create a character who is simultaneously fascinating and repelling?

As you write, keep in mind Morrison's words from the afterword that refer to her reluctance to "dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse" (211). As a 14-year-old boy, Cholly "cultivated his hatred of Darlene.... The one whom he had not been able to protect" (150), which could be interpreted as perhaps the beginning of his misogyny, violence, and self-contempt. Cholly's painful existence as a child could be explored in an essay and linked to his failure to value others around him, even his relatives.

## History and Context

This book was published in 1970, at a time when African Americans were still not being viewed seriously in America as artists and when they were often expected to write solely about the African-American experience (which was defined quite narrowly). The events in the novel are astonishing in their repugnance, and later authors such as Alice Walker experienced the backlash aimed at authors who wrote about the underbelly of African-American culture, exposing realities such as incest and domestic abuse. Morrison truly was taking a brave step forward by publishing a book examining such topics as incest and child abuse; many people were not ready for African Americans to be written about in a negative way, as it could reinforce negative views of African Americans. All of these issues can be explored further in an essay that deals with the novel's history and context.

### Sample Topics:

1. **The impact of media figures such as Shirley Temple on a race-conscious society:** How does Shirley Temple's brief mention at the beginning of the novel frame the novel's social critique about white supremacy and how it creates conceptions of ideal beauty?

"Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (20). Claudia's outlook on the racially biased ideal of beauty is a fascinating one that could lead to an in-depth discussion in an essay. Despite her youth, she tries to resist the pressure

to be drawn into worship of such ideals, although she does concede, "I learned much later to worship [Shirley Temple] ... even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement" (23).

2. **The effects of racism and internalized racism in America:** Although the novel is timeless, Morrison is writing about a specific historical period in which there was legally sanctioned segregation in America and legally sanctioned discrimination based on race. How does this background play a role in an understanding of the characters' struggles?

Morrison clearly identifies the effects of racism in the character of Geraldine, who in turn teaches her son the intricacies of race and by doing so reinforces racist traditions: "She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers.... Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (87). When Cholly experiences the callous side of the racist society he is a part of, he takes the harsh treatment from the ticket man at the bus station "at the colored side of the counter" (152) with ease, since "[t]he insults were part of the nuisances of life, like lice" (153). How do situations like these have a compounding negative effect on the characters?

3. **African-American women's historical domestic role:** How does Morrison portray African-American women's roles in the 1930s and 1940s?

To answer this broad question, you could do further research on the topic and incorporate it into your essay by turning, for example, to Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, which puts into historical context the work of African-American women. In *The Bluest Eye*, we see the domestic employment these women engaged in and the impact, for example, that Pauline Breedlove's status as a maid has on her family: "More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like afterthoughts" (127). Why might her job have led her to such neglect?

## Philosophy and Ideas

The book is rich with philosophical ideas and philosophical musings on the nature of human behavior. Morrison's novel presents us with many opportunities to gaze inside the lives of those whom society would deem a menace to its very fabric. For example, *The Bluest Eye* allows us into the minds of child molesters, maybe so that we can condemn their actions further, or so that we can consider what creates such abhorrent behavior. It is up to you as a reader of Morrison's work to form your own opinion and create your interpretation in your essays of the treacherous actions of such individuals.

### Sample Topics:

1. **Adult treatment of children:** How do adults regard or disregard children in the novel?

To explore this topic, you could turn to Claudia's early descriptions of her daily life and what they tell us about the ways adults regard children. She says, "Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions" (10), and that children are "merely pointed out" to Mr. Henry (15). Later on, when we read of Cholly's upbringing, we read, "Nobody talked to him; that is, they treated him like the child he was" (140). What other instances of adults dismissing children do we encounter in the book, and what impact does this have on those children?

2. **The archetypal "perfect" family:** Why does Morrison juxtapose the Dick and Jane story to the Breedloves' family life?

The opening Dick and Jane narrative that frames each section on the Breedlove family is hard to miss and appears in ironic contrast to the Breedloves' family life. The Breedloves defy the rules of the community by not quite fitting in, which can be discussed in an essay about belonging (see below). A neighbor remarks on this by saying, "Don't nobody know nothing about them no way.... Don't seem to have no people" (189). Instead of being the image of perfection like the family in the Dick and Jane storybooks, the children in families like the Breedloves "were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream" (92). Poverty, deprivation, literal and figurative hunger—these are all issues you could explore further in an essay on images of family life, not forgetting, of course, their ironic family name.

3. **People's sense of belonging and ownership:** What is the importance of the ways belonging and ownership are described in the novel?

A desire to belong is a central philosophical theme running throughout the novel. People want to belong, and they want to matter to someone other than themselves. There are many factors that can lead to belonging or ostracism. As a child,

Pauline Williams's deformed foot causes her to "never feel at home anywhere, or that she belonged anywhere" (111). Integral to belonging is ownership. If characters own a house or property, then they have a reason to exist, and will not face the fearsome fate of being displaced: "If you are outdoors, there is no place to go," (17) explains the narrator, Claudia MacTeer. There is also the fear of belonging to an undesirable group; Pecola Breedlove realizes "[a]s long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them [her family]" (45).

## Language, Symbols, and Imagery

Because of the complex language and symbolic references, the only way to fully comprehend this and other Morrison novels is to be an active reader—one who fully engages in the language of the text, asking questions, jotting down notes, and paying attention to foreshadowing and the establishing and extending of themes in the text. Reading *The Bluest Eye* for the language alone is a rewarding experience, and focusing in on the language could produce a remarkable essay. You could examine African-American vernacular, the way people converse with each other, the imagery, symbols, and the ways characters use language to describe themselves, like Pauline Breedlove's first-person recollections of her life, or Soaphead Church's letter to God.

### Sample Topics:

1. **Figurative language: metaphors/similes/personification/symbols:** How does the figurative language help to create a sense of the narrators' lives?

In your essay you could examine the breathtaking language in Morrison's first novel. Various metaphors, similes, symbols, and personification infuse the novel and continue to delight readers. You may want to consider the way Pauline bears her husband "like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross" (127) while she continues to lose her teeth and any semblance of beauty that the "painted ladies" (126) possess. The comparisons work so well because Pauline becomes a martyr who almost relishes the battles with her alcoholic husband. Make sure you relate the figure of speech to the character's personality or motivation to behave in a particular way, rather than simply pointing out the language itself.

2. **Allusions:** Explore the opening "Dick and Jane" section and relate it to the lives that the narrators and the community people actually lead.

This opening is unique, as are the openings of all of Morrison's novels, and has sparked much discussion. Is Morrison's allusion to the Dick and Jane storybook a claim that the characters are unrealistic and that no one can possibly create such a family system, or is she trying to illustrate how racism combined with poverty can destroy families, depriving them of a chance to flourish?

3. **Conversation:** Give examples of how "conversation is like a gently wicked dance" (15) in the novel and how it bonds people or destroys relationships.

For an essay about conversation, you have many rich examples to choose from. The conversation between the family and friends of Cholly's dead Aunt Jimmy is replete with insights into the corruption present in modern life, such as the fraudulence of some insurance companies. The conversations that the three prostitutes have that Pecola listens to are also telling. In the banter among the women, Pecola finds lessons on how to be a woman, and often hears comments that are inappropriate for a young girl to muse about.

## Compare and Contrast Essays

A useful approach to an essay is to identify parts of a story and analyze their similarities or differences. Pecola Breedlove's naïveté and innocence could not be a greater contrast to Soaphead Church's worldliness and malfeasance, this is an example of the sharp contrasts in Morrison's first novel. You might want to consider what Morrison is saying about Pecola Breedlove's world that contains such contrasts in moral and ethical behavior and the impact this world has on the innocent members of this society. In such an essay, it is important that you try not merely to list what two characters or situations have in common or how they differ; instead, relate your discoveries to an aspect of society that may be responsible for their behavior, for example. You can also consider the similarities from novel to novel because many connections have been drawn between *The Bluest Eye* and Morrison's other novels. *The Bluest Eye* can be compared and contrasted to *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Love* in their depictions of motherhood, the impact of the narrative voice, the role of the family, the effect of child abuse on its perpetrators, and the way society pressures the

individual.

## Sample Topics:

1. **Claudia MacTeer versus her sister Frieda MacTeer:** How different are Claudia and her sister?

Morrison contrasts the narrator and her sister, and presents us with a looking-glass into the nuances and confusions of childhood. At the beginning of the novel, Claudia is "[s]ick and tired of Frieda knowing everything" (28), and at the end, what they have in common is that they are both in the dark about why Pecola became and remained a victim. Why does Morrison allow both the narrator and her sister to remain in ignorance?

2. **Pauline Breedlove versus Charles "Cholly" Breedlove:** Examine the nature of the volatile relationship that the husband and wife share and what creates their distinct personalities.

Pauline Breedlove is described as "the ideal servant" (128) by her employers, Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, yet she remains thoroughly disappointed by her life, as does Cholly (42). How does Cholly feel about his life? You may also turn to the fact that they seem to save each other from the harsh realities of their lives, but the end result is quite chaotic.

3. **Pecola Breedlove versus Claudia MacTeer:** In what way does Claudia manage to survive the hostile racist world in which she lives, in ways that Pecola is unable to do?

For an essay on this intriguing topic, you could consider the familial or communal support each girl has, or the lack thereof. You may want to incorporate a discussion of belonging and abandonment, and the impact both have on the characters' ability to self-actualize. It is interesting to note that Claudia's father goes unmentioned, in contrast to Pecola's complicated father whose actions are devastating and far-reaching.

4. **The Individual versus the Community:** What price do characters pay for not fitting into the community?

You could examine the role of the three prostitutes, the Breedlove family, and others who are on society's margins. Investigate the way Morrison comments on those who conform and those who disregard social rules. What do both the conformists and the nonconformists suffer because of their choices? Does Morrison set up a dichotomy regarding what people should do, or are choices more complicated? Because incest is a part of their family legacy, the Breedlove family, for example, loses the favor of the community. They are pitied and scorned, and the children (who did not choose the behavior, hence the dilemma of either conforming or not) seem to suffer the most from the family being ostracized.

## Further Information

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