

**Micro-Lecture: *The Bluest Eye***  
*Contemporary Literature*

**“Autumn”**

You may have noticed that Morrison separates her novel into four seasons: Autumn, Winter, Spring, and Summer, which mark the span of time in which the events of the story take place. Morrison also abandons conventional chapters, opting instead to separate scenes by a line from the Dick and Jane novels that were the subject of our earlier lecture and which are stylistically repeated in the preface to the novel. For instance, between Claudia’s narration at the beginning of “Autumn” and the third-person omniscient narrator that takes over to describe the Breedloves’ house there is a line that acts as a section break:

HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWHITEITHASAREDDOOR  
ITISVERYPRETTYITISVERYPRETTYPRETTYPRETTYPRETT

For these section breaks, Morrison has chosen to present the lines stylistically as they appeared in the third repeated paragraph of the preface, eliminating all spaces and punctuation. Why? Notice what is described in the scenes that follow these breaks. These lines hold significance well beyond their structural function. As the novel continues, reflect on how Morrison uses these mashed-up Dick-and-Jane lines as mashed-up ironic-metaphor-motifs.

Once you begin the “Autumn” portion, pay attention to how Claudia describes her community. Ask yourself what she means when she refers to those in her community as living on the “hem of life.” Unable to exercise the same control over their lives that many of us take for granted, their ability to change their lot in life is reminiscent of the Tralfamadorian belief regarding free will: that you can’t change the past, present, or future. However, we understand that the world in which Claudia and her community exist is not Tralfamadore, and they are not without free agency; they simply are kept from exercising such agency by the society in which they live. This goes back to Morrison’s tendency to give us characters shaped by their dreams but held back by their circumstances. In a world lived at the peripheral, with the chasm between the “haves” and the “have nots” so wide, to have anything becomes a mark of stability. Ownership, then, no matter how small, becomes something precious.

What are the circumstances that hold back a community like Claudia’s broadly and an individual like Pecola specifically? Pay close attention to “The Doll Test” text box in your study guide, as well as the section on “Race and Beauty.” As a minority living in a world designed by and for the majority, it’s easy to understand how someone’s natural identity becomes skewed, shaped, and even lost in a world that does not recognize them, and in a world in which they do not recognize themselves: on television, in movies, in magazines, in books, in art, in positions of authority, or in realms of influence. When the world says, “this is what is good, this is what is natural, this is what is beautiful” it is tempting either to strive to become that or else hate yourself for your inability to become that. If we cannot find a way to be included, then we cannot help but feel excluded. Ask yourself why Claudia has such a different (at times almost violent) response to the white baby dolls and the “Shirley Temples” of the world compared to the admiration in which the two older girls, Frieda and Pecola, hold those same ideals.

This is where the idea of self-loathing comes into play, and it is perhaps the most widely explored theme in the novel, as Morrison threads myriad examples of individuals who have internalized the

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broad prejudices, expectations, and normative values of others in ways that destroy a healthy sense of self, stymie growth, and trap us inside paradigms (i.e., Dick and Jane) that are, in many cases, impossible to maintain without tremendous cost to the soul.

As you continue, I'd like you to be thinking about family and community—those who have it, those who don't, and the role of family and community in the life of an individual. Pay special attention to the Breedloves. As described, what is their respective “ugliness”—Mrs. Breedlove's? Cholly's? Sammy's? Pecola's?—and how does each character handle his or her ugliness? Now try to go deeper and ask yourself what role, if any, family or community has played in the way they view themselves. I think our current circumstances—shelter-in-place, social distancing, travel restrictions—bring particular significance to the importance of connection, and what a lack of connection can mean to our health and well-being, or, conversely, how detrimental unhealthy connections can be and how adversely they can shape the trajectory of our lives.

Finally, as you near the end of “Autumn,” you will witness what is very likely the turning point in Pecola's life—the point at which she finally swallows and comes to believe what others say is good and pretty and valuable, the point at which she internalizes all the institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism of her community and (many would say) her country: the point of no return. On her walk to Mr. Yakobowski's candy store, Pecola notices all the dandelions sprouting up and wonders why people call them “weeds” when she thinks they are so “pretty.” However, something about her interaction with Mr. Yakobowski shifts her perspective on the return trip home, and when she looks at the dandelions again after leaving the candy store, she thinks, “They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds.” This is where you must read deeply. Understand the two ways in which Morrison uses the weeds—one literal and one metaphoric. Understand what Pecola wants from Mr. Yakobowski—literally and metaphorically.

If you can decode that scene, then you are well along your way to unlocking the novel as a whole and, more importantly, to understanding the power of storytelling.