

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

**The Bluest Eye: Introduction and Preface**

“A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species *Homo sapiens* – second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives...”

—Reynolds Price, Author

Storytelling is a mark of culture—one of the earliest, according to many anthropologists. Storytelling predates writing. We learn about one another—and understand ourselves—by telling stories. That’s one of the primary reasons many authors write. It’s certainly one of the reasons Toni Morrison writes. And with *The Bluest Eye*, we have a wonderful example of just how powerful narrative can be in tapping into our humanity: the bold and the beautiful, the good and the bad and the ugly.

The novel, as a medium, gives voice to the voiceless—the common man, woman, or child, the everyday individual, the sort of person who isn’t given his or her own Wikipedia page, the sort of persona more like us. The novel—unlike a sociological study or a biography or even a film—can take us inside the mind of a character, offering the kind of interior monologue that we all have rattling around inside our heads but are all too often afraid to share out loud or to post on social media. And even if we did wish to share that part of ourselves, we often aren’t equipped with the words to articulate (or even to understand) those deep-seated feelings that dwell below our consciousness, below the “iceberg,” so to speak. The novelist is equipped. The novelist mines the interior lives of characters who, though fictional, experience the world in many of the same ways we do. That’s the job of the novelist. They show us not only what the world is, but more importantly, what the world feels like.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison gives voice to the voiceless—in the case of this book, a host of characters from the same corner of the world: a black, working-class neighborhood in Lorain, Ohio, in the early 1940s. If you read and remember the lecture notes, you’ll see how Morrison’s own background gives her unique insight into the lives of these people, many of whom feel (for very good reason) as though they have no voice—eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove the most voiceless (and helpless) among them. Pay attention as you read to the narrative point-of-view. Though the bulk of the novel is told from the first-person point-of-view of a grown-up Claudia looking back (much like Scout Finch) on the events of a single year from her childhood, the novel occasionally shifts point-of-view to include the brief first-person narratives of other characters, as well as creating an omniscient narrator for certain scenes. With these authorial choices, we see Morrison giving voice to the voiceless by allowing them to tell their own stories.

And though these characters might seem, on first blush, wholly different from many of us—in race or class or gender, and certainly in point-of-time—if you are willing to listen, *The Bluest Eye* explores many of the issues with which we all struggle: hope, fear, lust, love, anger, grief, and shame. Though we come to each in different ways and by different degrees, these concepts are not bound by race or class or gender or time period. We are human, and humans struggle. As we read the novel, I’m going to ask each of you to reflect upon these ideas and to notice how Morrison

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uses the tools of the novel to explore these issues in ways that help give insight into ourselves and one another.

As you read the preface to the novel, ask yourself why Morrison chooses to repeat the same passage three times, each time making only a slight change to the style in which the words are arranged. Recall the lecture notes regarding “Dick and Jane,” then read the “Autumn” section of the study guide, and try to imagine what the country looked like and must have felt like to little girls like Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola. It was a very different time from the one in which we live today. However, is it possible that these same issues still exist, simply in different ways? Are there social paradigms (established socio-cultural patterns) in which many of us are asked to participate? Are there particular gender roles many of us are asked to fulfill? Pecking orders (unspoken hierarchies among social animals) never go away, whether as large as the country or as small as your peer group or family. What happens to those who refuse to participate or simply cannot operate successfully within these normative constructs? What obligation does a family have to its individuals? What obligation does a community have to its families? What obligation does a nation have to its communities? What if an individual is let down by all three? What if the soil of the entire country is just “bad for certain kinds of flowers,” as it is for the novel’s protagonist, Pecola Breedlove? What then?