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

**"Winter"**

In this part of the novel, we are given two different scenes, each revolving around new characters. None of these characters are returned to again. This begs the question: Why would Morrison waste our time introducing us to characters who will vanish forever after ten or twelve pages? The answer is twofold.

First, as mentioned before, in writing this novel Morrison has attempted show us a multitude of different individuals, sometimes with very little in common aside from the fact that each has internalized, in his or her own way, the broad prejudices, expectations, and normative values of others in ways that destroy their sense of self and leave them trapped inside paradigms that cannot be maintained without ruining the soul.

Second, this is the moment in the novel where one of Morrison's major motifs starts to take shape and gain steam: pecking orders. Because pecking orders are largely determined by unspoken but implicitly agreed upon social constructs and standards, the internalization of the previously mentioned prejudices, expectations, and normative values is the very thing that creates and drives the pecking order.

In the first half of "Winter," we meet the new kid at school: Maureen Peel, "a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes" (the symbolism could not be more obvious). The section on Maureen in your study guide is particularly helpful, as it clearly articulates the dynamics among the girls, the school, and, in subtle ways, the nation in regard to Maureen. Claudia says that she and Frieda "hated" Maureen, but she also suggests that "secretly" they might like to be her friend . . . "if she would let" them. This seeming contradiction is a perfect example of how internalized self-loathing, shame, and anger all work together to further entrench us in unhealthy pecking orders.

Maureen is biracial, green-eyed, and wealthier than the other girls. She is as close to "Jane" (and what society appears to value) as a little black girl might get. For this, the girls hate her, because they are jealous. However, these are the same qualities for which they admire her, because they wish (unconsciously) to be her, and by being her friend ("if she would let them"), they are at least in proximity to those qualities and therefore might rise in their own social standing. Of course, the girls have no conscious understanding of this, but many of the forces that bear down upon us are invisible yet incredibly powerful in shaping our behavior and feelings of self-worth. This has always been true in the past; it remains true in the present; and it will continue to be true in the future. That is why books from another time are still read today: their stories, no matter how old, provide relevant analogies. We may not be carbon copies of the characters about whom we read, but we suffer in many of the same ways.

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In the second half of "Winter," we're introduced first to a general population of women nebulously referred to as "they." The picture painted is one of southern domesticity, as "these thin brown girls" live in "quiet black neighborhoods where everybody is gainfully employed" and with "porch

swings hanging from chains." In some ways, "these" women are what the Maureens of the world might yet become. Everything sounds blissful… but look closely at how "these" women are described, notice how their natural selves must be subjugated to win the approval of a society enchanted by "whiteness." As Morrison writes, such women "go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master […] Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings: how to behave." *How to behave*. Think about what that means.

Very soon, Morrison animates the vague outline of "these" women by giving us a concrete example of one such woman, in the form of Geraldine. It's here that we witness the generational cost of internalized racism as well as internalized sexism. Nobody escapes it. What Geraldine has internalized, her son Junior will likely internalize, just as Claudia will eventually "come to love" white dolls and Shirley Temple. Ask yourself whether Geraldine and Junior are happy. Geraldine is so single-mindedly focused on the "appearance" of things—because only that which is public can enhance your status—that she seems unable to demonstrate intimate affection for anything other than her cat. Junior is not allowed to play with anyone other than Ralph Nisensky (I always imagine Millhouse from *The Simpsons*). And when Geraldine comes face to face with Pecola, what Geraldine really sees in front of her is the personification of everything she has fought her whole life not to be. In the end, no one wins. Geraldine's own shame and self-loathing leave her disconnected from others. Junior's feelings of neglect manifest in anger and jealousy. And Pecola—who believes she is ugly, who longs for blue eyes, and who has no concept love—is once again belittled and bludgeoned—this time by a "pretty milk-brown lady" in a "pretty gold-and-green house" with "Jesus looking down on her with sad and unsurprised eyes."

The Maureens and Geraldines of the world, with their perceived social status, seem only to confirm all that Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda have unconsciously felt: that whiter is better. The damage is astounding—to everyone: those who struggle to climb up in the pecking order, those who struggle to maintain their rank, and those who struggle simply to hang on to the "hem."