

STUDY GUIDE

Toni Morrison's

THE BLUEST EYE

based on the novel by Toni Morrison

adapted for the stage by Lydia Diamond

directed by Hallie Gordon



steppenwolf

arts exchange

The Bluest Eye is the story of a young African American girl and her family who are affected in every direction by the dominant American culture that says to them, "You're not beautiful; you're not relevant; you're invisible; you don't even count."

That is what is painful in the novel -- the way in which our country has dealt with race, the way in which the power structure has hurt us, and the way in which it has made us hurt ourselves. Often enough we African Americans don't get the opportunity to say "This is the source of my dysfunction, and it's not all my fault."

To be shown that when you are young is painful, horrible. On the other hand, it is very affirming to have all these things made very clear and relevant; things that I knew were sick and wrong, things that touched me in these intangible ways, all made clear just by having the lives of people like me represented in literature.

-Lydia Diamond, Adaptor

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Claudia and Frieda

Claudia and Frieda McTeer are adult sisters remembering events that happened when they were nine and ten years old. Since the story is told through the filter of childhood memory, Claudia and Frieda speak as children for much of the play, using adult voices only when reflecting on the events of the play from a future vantage point. They live with their Mama and Daddy, a secure family in a modest home. Claudia is very precocious and observant. Frieda, the older sister, is more practical and less contemplative than Claudia. Both have strong opinions and vivid imaginations.



“Since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*.”

Storytelling

Claudia and Frieda, the narrators of *The Bluest Eye*, guide us into the story and establish the framework of memory that creates the reflective tone of the play. As adults, Claudia and Frieda try to understand why the terrible events they remember happened, but they cannot. Instead, they tell the story of Pecola's life, hoping that putting what happened into words will allow them to understand it. In telling Pecola's story, they find it necessary to also tell her parents' stories, which contain the foundations of her life. By using the tangible and immediate as a means to describe something too complicated and fraught to be easily grasped, they use the *how* of Pecola's life to approach the *why* of her disintegration.

“Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941.”



Community

In a community and a culture where the adults are not acting as caretakers for their children, children must take responsibility for each other. Claudia and Frieda look after Pecola when she lives with them. They continue to feel responsible for her after she has been raped and impregnated by her father. In doing so, they shoulder a burden that should be carried by the entire community. They give up hope of buying a bicycle and instead, in an attempt to save Pecola's unborn baby, plant the marigold seeds they have been selling to earn money. Their offering, their prayers, and their magic song may be childish, but the girls make a sacrifice of their own comfort and privilege, something that no one else in their community is willing to do for Pecola. They link their lives to hers and hold themselves accountable for her fate.

The Doll Test

During the 1940s and '50s, the husband and wife team Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted a series of psychological experiments examining young black children's relationship to race. The study had several parts, but the "Doll Test" is most remembered today: The Clarks gave very young children otherwise identical brown and white dolls. The children were asked to say which doll was "nice," and which was "bad." An overwhelming majority of the black children identified the white doll positively and the brown doll negatively. The results of the study were cited in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as an indication of the psychological damage done to black children by school segregation.

“I had only one desire: to dismember it.”

Race and Beauty

Claudia and Frieda are given baby dolls for Christmas. Frieda and Pecola adore these white dolls and Shirley Temple, thinking of the dolls and the little girl with the golden ringlets and rosy cheeks as examples of ideal children. When asked why she loves Shirley Temple so much, Pecola says, "She's pretty and talented and people love her." Shirley Temple seems to be all that Pecola is not, and Pecola loves her for it.

Claudia, on the other hand, hates Shirley Temple in the same way that she hates the blonde, blue-eyed dolls she is given for Christmas. Claudia doesn't know why she should love such a doll, so instead of caring for it, she dissects it, thinking maybe she'll find "what the world thought was so wonderful about pink skin and yellow hair." Claudia is angry that Shirley Temple gets to dance with Mr. Bojanles, a black man, "my friend, my uncle, my daddy, who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me." It seems to Claudia that the world likes little white girls best, and so the dolls become a symbol of that preference and a symbol of how she, as a little black girl, can never be loved the most.



Shirley Temple and Bojanles

Claudia distrusts the "magic" through which little white girls are able to win the hearts of adults, but Pecola believes that if she looked even a little bit like them, people might think she was pretty and would love and take care of her. Claudia does not believe that whiteness equals goodness and senses the racism inherent in that assumption. A pervasive element of Pecola's tragedy is her internalization of the disregard with which her community treats her.

Mama

Claudia and Frieda's Mama is an imposing woman with a stern presence. She is more present in the story than their father, since she works at home, cooking and cleaning and taking care of the children. Her priorities are very clear. She will care for her daughters and bring them up right, no matter what it takes. She loves them with a toughness and conviction that leaves little room for tenderness but includes a great deal of care.

“When I think of autumn,
I think of somebody with
hands who does not want
me to die.”

Family

At the beginning of the play, Claudia gets sick. Mama scolds and may seem harsh with her, but Claudia knows that her anger is directed at the sickness she is trying to cure. Her first concern is Claudia's and Frieda's health: physical, emotional, and moral. Mama is a source of security and strength for Claudia and Frieda because she has always been the steadfast center of their lives. Despite the scolding and the whippings, they know she will do anything for them. Claudia's and Frieda's Mama embodies the love and security that Pecola's family lacks. In the play, the unconditional love Mama provides for her daughters contrasts with Mrs. Breedlove's disdain for Pecola. Their family relationships parallel the community support that is present for Claudia and Frieda but not for Pecola.



“Don't *nobody* need *three* quarts of milk.
Henry Ford don't need three quarts of milk.”

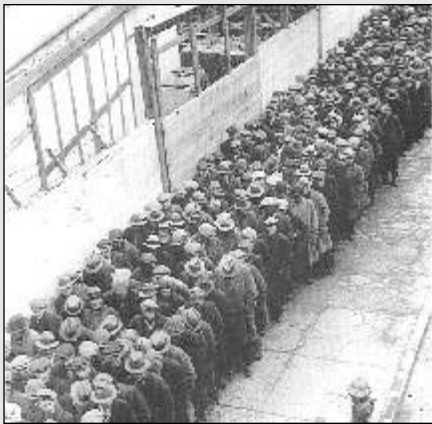
Community

When Pecola comes to stay at their house, Mama agrees to provide for her but will not be imposed upon. When she sees that three quarts of milk have been drunk in one day, she assumes Pecola drank them and throws a fit, showing Pecola that she can rely on her only if she does not ask too much. Ultimately, no one person can take the place of a community in supporting an individual. Because she is poor, because her parents are not from Lorain, and because her family is labeled "peculiar," Pecola does not have the support of her community. Mama shows her some kindness, Claudia and Frieda make friends with her, but her place as a part of the town is not secure. Eventually the community abandons her.

The Great Depression

The Bluest Eye is set at the end of the Depression, and its effects are still felt by the characters. It is, in part, because of the Depression that Cholly does not have a job and that waste is so abhorrent to Mama.

On Tuesday October 24th, 1929, the Wall Street stock market crashed, precipitating the most severe economic crisis in U.S. history: the Great Depression. The stock market crash caused a downward spiral that resulted in over a decade of mass unemployment and poverty. By 1933, unemployment nationwide had risen to 26.6%, and those who were fortunate enough to find work were severely underpaid. Frugality could mean the difference between having enough food to feed your family and going hungry.



Waiting for food in a breadline

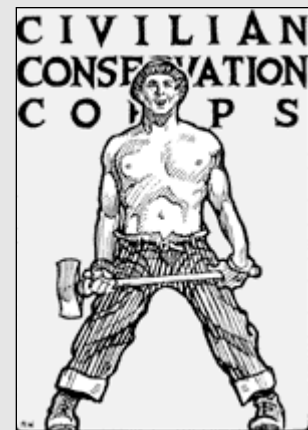


In search of work

In hopes of giving relief to the struggling nation, President Roosevelt established the "New Deal" programs to create jobs and stimulate economic recovery for the United States. The Civilian Conservation Corps, Civil Works Administration, Works Progress Administration, and other government offices instituted by Roosevelt employed millions in many different capacities. Although the New Deal assisted greatly, it was not until World War II that employment returned to a normal level and most of the poverty and destitution associated with the Great Depression came to an end.



President Roosevelt with a friend



Mrs. Breedlove

Pauline Breedlove is Pecola's mother. She lives in a hastily converted storefront with her husband, Cholly, and her children, Pecola and Sammy. She works as a maid for a rich, white family. When she was a girl, Mrs. Breedlove stepped on a nail and injured her foot, causing her to walk with a limp for the rest of her life. She blames the beginning of her unhappiness on her foot, but she remembers when her dreams seemed attainable.

“I didn't mind that he sometimes drank too much, 'cause it seem like we was all the time laughing.”

Memory



Mrs. Breedlove narrates parts of *The Bluest Eye*, and her memories provide the context for Pecola's experiences. While Claudia and Frieda are the primary narrators for the events that occur in their lifetimes, Mrs. Breedlove's voice is heard when the play moves into the past. Her oral history of her family helps explain the pain and violence of Pecola's life. Mrs. Breedlove's unhappiness at Pecola's birth instigates Pecola's self-loathing and conviction of her own ugliness. Mrs. Breedlove describes the traumatic experiences of Cholly's youth with empathy. Her point of view adds dimension to Cholly, who would otherwise appear to be only violent and destructive. Mrs. Breedlove's memories provide a picture of the circumstances of her family and her community that produce Pecola's tragic life.

The Great Migration

In the period between 1916 and the 1960s, more than six million Southern black people moved to the North. Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove left the rural South as a part of this trend, as did many African Americans who came to populate Lorain and other Midwest towns.

Like many northern towns with industrial economies, Lorain was a destination of this "Great Migration". The end of the Civil War and emancipation of slaves did not result in racial equality in the South. Lynching continued, Jim Crow laws limited the rights of black people, and the transition out of a slave-based economy resulted in economic hardship for everyone, especially for the former slaves. In the late 1800s, black people started moving north in search of jobs and greater racial tolerance. This migration increased dramatically in the early 20th century, largely in response to an increased number of unskilled factory job openings in northern companies during World War I.

“I settled down to being ugly.”

Beauty and Ugliness

When Mrs. Breedlove was young, she dreamed of falling in love. She wanted to be carried away by a man who possessed, "tenderness, strength, and a promise of rest," and one day Cholly came along and swept her off her feet. He kissed the injured foot she had thought made her unworthy of attention, and they fell in love. She followed him to Ohio and settled down to live the simple, happy, love-filled life of her daydreams.

When she was five months pregnant with her first child, Mrs. Breedlove lost her front tooth on a piece of candy. She'd learned from going to the movies that to be happy you had to wear pretty clothes and have a lovely smile. Missing a tooth, irreparably flawed according to Hollywood values, she gave up on her hopes of glamour or even happiness. The reality of her Depression-era life in a small, dusty, Midwest town did not measure up to the standard of her dreams, so she told herself she was ugly and worthless.



“Don't you worry none baby...
They weren't nobody.”

Family

Mrs. Breedlove's life exists in a tension between the cleanliness and order of the house where she works and the dirt and chaos of her home. Pecola and Sammy are a part of the dirty, ugly world



that she escapes by going to work, so Mrs. Breedlove distances herself from them as well as from Cholly. Rather than try to fix the imperfect by attempting to bring home some of the order and control she finds at work, Mrs. Breedlove puts energy into a world which is not really hers. She carries out her duty to support her children, but she does not look to them as a source of happiness.





Winter

Maureen Peal

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Beauty and Worth
Race and Beauty

Maureen Peal

"A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes," Maureen is a newcomer to the girls' school, a light-skinned, green-eyed rich girl with perfect clothes and enviable lunches. She "enchants" the school: teachers encourage her, boys stop fighting when she appears, white girls tolerate her, black girls defer to her. Claudia and Frieda hate Maureen, but she fascinates them. Without wanting to admit it, they crave her attention.



Fredi Washington played Peola in the film *Imitation of Life*

"In her presence, we became just a little bit dirtier, a little bit poorer, a little bit more invisible."

Beauty and Worth

Maureen embodies the problematic correlation between beauty and worth. Because she is "cute", she is adored and privileged. She is haughty and capricious, but people like her regardless of her behavior. Even after Maureen turns on Pecola, calling her ugly and accusing her of seeing her father naked, Pecola admires her.

Imitation of Life

When Maureen meets Pecola, she tells the girls about a movie she has seen, *Imitation of Life*.

The 1934 film centers on a pair of mothers and daughters, one white, one black. The black woman's daughter, Peola, is very light-skinned and forsakes her mother to pass as white. When her mother dies of heartbreak, Peola returns to cry at her funeral.

The movie treats Peola's blackness as a tragedy which has befallen her: without her mother present to indicate her true race, people believe that she is white and she is accordingly privileged. At one point, the white daughter taunts Peola by calling her black, just as Maureen calls Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola "ugly black e mos" when they fight.



"I am cute! And you are ugly!"

Race and Beauty

Maureen is considered beautiful in large part because of the characteristics that make her look white: her fair skin, her long hair, and her green eyes. Her wealth also makes her seem to Claudia more like the white girls at school. Her whiteness (and hence her beauty and rank) is unattainable for Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, but they see its power nonetheless. Pecola's wish for blue eyes presents a pathological extreme of the desire to share that power. Pecola imagines that if she had blue eyes people would not do bad things in front of her, and Maureen's charmed life seems to support that idea.

Her perceived proximity to whiteness attracts people to her, but since she is still black, Claudia and Frieda are more free to express their hatred of her privilege than that of the rich white girls at school. Her position between two races also provides Claudia and Frieda fodder for an ugly version of her name: Meringue Pie, which is brown outside and white inside. Maureen is a safer and more accessible target for their anger than actual rich white girls. (Morrison gives those girls, whose lives are very foreign to Claudia and Frieda, only a passing mention.) However cute and privileged, Maureen is not a rich white girl, and her similarities to Claudia and Frieda place her within their reach.

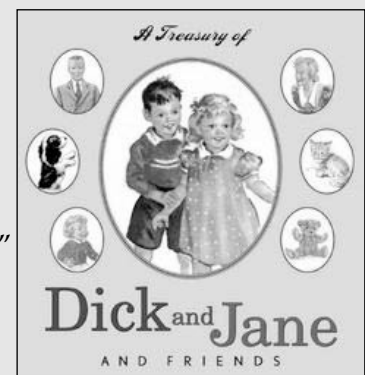
"We felt comfortable in our own skins...and could not comprehend this unworthiness."

The advantages that Maureen's looks confer upon her are unfair and unearned, and the most poisonous result of that inequity is the doubt the other girls develop. Claudia and Frieda have not yet learned to consider themselves "lesser," but when faced with Maureen, whose light skin accords her so many benefits, they begin to wonder what makes her more worthy than they. Without considering the implications, they begin to reject themselves: when Maureen insults them by calling them "black," Claudia responds with "Who are you calling black?"

Dick and Jane

From the 1930s to the 1960s the "Dick and Jane" books served as school texts for the vast majority of American school children. Students followed the carefree lives of Mother, Father, Dick, Jane, little sister Sally, and Spot. The characters' environment represented the white, middle-class American ideal: a home and neighborhood that was clean, safe, and friendly, where no one ever scraped a knee, got into a fight, or was punished for misbehaving. Father would come home after work and eat a dinner made by Mother, and the family lived securely behind their white picket fence.

For many children of the Depression and World War II era, the "Dick and Jane" series did not speak to their experience of poverty and suffering. Many grew to resent the artificial illustration of American life that the books offered. As America continued to evolve in its ideas about race, gender, and class, the "Dick and Jane" books strove to reflect these standards. With the fervor of the Civil Rights movement, more inclusive versions of the stories appeared which included African American, Asian American, and other minority families, acknowledging America's diverse population.





Spring

Cholly

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Family and Community Theft of Innocence

Soaphead Church

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Race Community

Cholly

Cholly is Pecola's father, Mrs. Breedlove's husband. Abandoned by his parents, he was raised in Georgia by his great aunt Jimmy, and he left home after her death, when he was fourteen. As a young man, Cholly is tender and curious, but marriage dulls his imagination and fatherhood dumbfounds him. He is a volatile presence in Pecola's life, vacillating between neglect and violence.

“Had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen...he might have felt a stable connection between himself and [his] children.”

Family

Cholly's life exemplifies the problems that occur when family bonds disintegrate. With Aunt Jimmy, his life is meager but secure. She dies, and Cholly no longer has a family to belong to. He is adrift in a destabilized world suddenly without rules -- there is no one to "whup" him -- but also without support or protection. In the book, he runs away in a desperate search for his long-absent father. After a long journey, he meets his father, but instead of family stability he finds only a small and angry man with no interest in or connection to his son. Cholly comes unmoored from any structure which might support him. He becomes "dangerously free" -- a "godlike" state in which he is no one's responsibility and is responsible for no one. His response to the world, to his wife, and eventually to his children is based only on his feelings at a particular moment. He has had no models for being a father and member of a family nor for being a man of dignity and compassion.

“I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year.”

Community

In telling Cholly's story, Morrison expands on the "why" of the novel's tragedies by explaining the "how." She does not excuse Cholly's violence, but she refuses to isolate his actions from his community's failings. That Morrison includes Cholly's history at all indicates her intent that readers regard him not as a mindless, unaccountable monster but as a damaged and wounded man whose inability to confront and repair his pain has tragic consequences. In light of his past, his role of abuser and exploiter is dispiriting but hardly surprising.



“Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him.”



Theft of Innocence

Cholly is a living lesson that we are all repositories of our experience, that the cruelties visited upon us play out in our conduct. Morrison offers the horrifying scene of Cholly and Darlene -- interrupted, threatened, and humiliated by a pair of white hunters who delight in terrifying a black man for sport -- as part of the "how" of Cholly's failure to build a strong and nurturing relationship with his wife and children.

After Aunt Jimmy's funeral, emboldened by the sudden loss of anyone to watch over him and by the privileges of his bereavement, Cholly seeks out the girl he likes, Darlene. She is an exciting distraction from the loss of Aunt Jimmy, and their time together might have been a sweet transition from childhood to adulthood. They shift naturally from the games of children -- throwing grapes and running through the gully -- to a gentle exploration of each others' bodies. Cholly is caught between his sadness and his desire; his insecurity and uncertainty are coupled with a fierce need for affection and closeness. He is mourning the loss of Aunt Jimmy and his childhood as he embraces Darlene and the possibilities of adulthood.

The indelibly shocking arrival of the two white hunters damages Cholly. They destroy the tenderness which he had felt with Darlene, and, worse, they poison his experience of the world thereafter. He is left stranded, with neither the gentleness of a child nor the power of a man. What might have proved the beginning of a caring and powerful maturity has been derailed, leaving Cholly a wounded man whose inability to confront and repair his pain has tragic consequences: his anguish is perpetuated and its sickening ripples radiate outward.

The Women

An unnamed but significant character in *The Bluest Eye* is the community in which the events take place. In the play, the community is personified by the three women who periodically comment on the action. They function as an expository device, giving the audience needed information, and as a tool for establishing the time and place of the story.

The women are played by various actors and remain unspecific but influential. When Cholly overhears the women of his childhood talking about Aunt Jimmy, he understands a crucial ramification of her death: that he is now alone. Frieda and Claudia hear of Pecola's pregnancy by listening to the women of their town gossip.

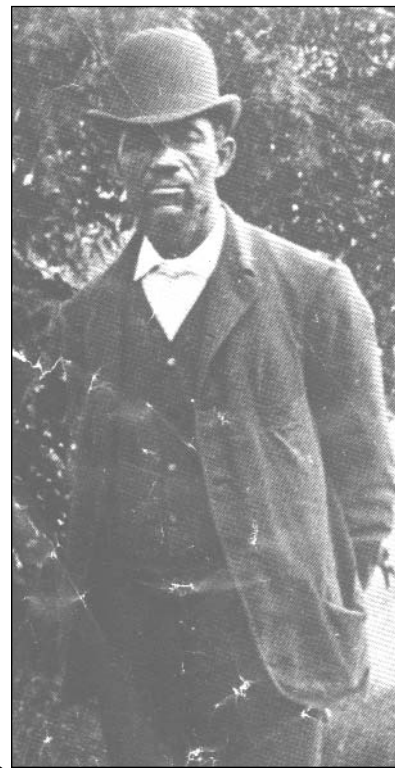
The women gossip and they judge the events in their communities. They comment, but they do not become involved. They keep busy with the day-to-day tasks while talking about events that change lives, and their collective inaction permits Pecola's rape, pregnancy, and madness.

Soaphead Church

Elihue Micah Whitcomb, known as Soaphead Church, comes from an aristocratic West Indian family of mixed race. His mother died shortly after his birth. Elihue was well educated by his father, a strict schoolmaster. His family valued education as a means to prove that their proximity to whiteness made them superior to their blacker neighbors and countrymen.

In the town of Lorain, Soaphead Church is an outsider, coming as he does from a geographically and racially exotic background. He is the town "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams," and veers toward megalomania. He is tolerated but not trusted, for he is known to have pedophilic tendencies with young girls.

"All civilizations derive from the white race, none can exist without its help, and a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it."



Race

Soaphead Church is a misanthrope, a label that allows him to feel perversely noble on the rare occasions that he touches, helps, or counsels a human being. He grew up thinking, in the manner of his family and ancestors, that blackness was ugly and that whiteness was noble. Because of this wide gulf between this received "wisdom" and the black man he sees in the mirror, he hates himself for not being white enough, and he hates other blacks for being "too" black. He is trapped in the negativity of his self image and in his limited, warped view of the world, and he therefore loathes all human beings. This loathing manifests itself in a disgust for the human body:

"He abhorred flesh on flesh. Body odor, breath odor, overwhelmed him. The sight of dried matter in the corner of the eye, decayed or missing teeth, ear wax, blackheads, moles, blisters, skin crusts -- all the natural excretions and protections the body was capable of -- disquieted him. His attentions therefore gradually settled on those humans whose bodies were least offensive -- children."



"As in the case of many misanthropes, his disdain for people led him into a profession designed to serve them."



Community

Despite his abiding hatred of humankind and as a consequence of his own perceived superiority, Soaphead counsels those who need advice. Pecola comes to him barely pregnant and asks him to grant her wish for blue eyes. Soaphead finds this pathetic request somehow moving. He believes that this little girl is ugly and that her wish for blue eyes -- with its underlying negation and rejection of her own race -- is a noble one. He wants to play God and bestow upon her this impossible gift.

Soaphead Church Spiritualist

If you are overcome with trouble
and conditions that are not natural, I can remove them.
Does bad luck seem to follow you?
Has the one you love changed? I can tell you why.
I am a true Spiritualist and Psychic Reader, born with power.
I will help you.
Satisfaction Guaranteed.

Soaphead's landlord has a old, blind, and mangy dog that is repulsive to him, that he feels must be put out of his misery. The possibility of taking his own form of cruel mercy on both the dog and on Pecola makes Soaphead feel imbued with a new power. He now believes that he can solve the troubles of the world by undertaking what God cannot, or will not, do. He grants Pecola blue eyes that only she will be able to see. He tells her that, to have them, she must give the dog poison. In the kind of magical thinking common to fairy tales, if the animal reacts, she will be granted blue eyes. The dog of course dies.

This act, which Pecola takes to be her salvation, proves to be her undoing. The folly of this forced cruelty pushes Pecola over the edge of sanity and makes Soaphead believe that he is better than God, a belief he describes in a letter he writes to God:

"Do you know what she came for? Blue eyes. New blue eyes, she said. Like she was buying shoes. "I'd like a pair of new blue eyes." She must have asked you for them for a very long time, and you hadn't replied...That's why I changed the little black girl's eyes for her, and I didn't touch her; not a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. Not for pleasure, and not for money. I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show...."



Summer

Pecola

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Time and Coming of Age
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Pecola

Pecola Breedlove, daughter of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove, wants blue eyes so that people will stop doing bad things in front of her. Pecola loves Shirley Temple and Mary Jane candies, and she wants the apparent happiness of pretty Shirley and the blue-eyed girl on the Mary Jane wrapper. More than anything, she wants to be loved and to fit in, but she is constantly tormented and abused by her family and school mates. Pecola's father rapes her and she becomes pregnant with his baby. Eventually, the violence and degradation of her life pushes Pecola to insanity: she believes she has blue eyes, and she lives within the world she has created rather than the abusive community available to her.

"I have prayed now going on a year, but I have hope still...To have something wonderful as that happen would have to take a long, long time."



Time and Coming of Age

The changing seasons in *The Bluest Eye* extend the metaphor of Pecola's coming of age and passage through puberty. Her entrance into womanhood is met by an incestuous rape, unwanted pregnancy, and social rejection. In the afterward to the book, Toni Morrison says, "In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid the complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to."

In the Autumn section, Pecola moves out of childhood quickly with no comfort from her own mother. She starts menstruating while staying with Claudia and Frieda. She does not know why she is bleeding, and Frieda tells her, "It just means you can have a baby." When Pecola asks how, Frieda responds, "Somebody has to love you." But when Pecola asks "How you do that?" no one knows.

In Winter, Pecola's friendship with Claudia and Frieda develops. When Maureen Peal walks home from school with the girls, Pecola is part of a community, unlike before. The girls talk about hair and the movies, but their companionship does not last long. The girls get into a fight and Claudia and Frieda feel the need to stand up for Pecola by calling Maureen "six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie." Maureen's rejection of Pecola represents the continual rejection Pecola receives from everyone but Claudia and Frieda.

In Spring, Pecola is raped by her father, Cholly. The event ruptures Pecola's adolescence, tearing her away from childhood and into an adult sexuality she is not ready for. Her life before the rape was certainly troubled, but after the rape, she is disconnected from the process of coming of age.

In Summer, a pregnant Pecola turns to Soaphead Church, asking him to answer the prayer God has ignored: to give her blue eyes. When her baby dies before it is born, Pecola takes refuge in a world of her own creation, discussing her beautiful blue eyes with a friend who does not exist. Like the marigolds which do not grow, Pecola is lost to the world, trapped between childhood and adulthood, unable to be anything but broken.

"And people would have to be nice and the teacher would see me, they would really look at me in my eyes and say, look at pretty-eyed Pecola."

Family and Community

Pecola is defenseless against the violence and brutal remarks thrown at her by her schoolmates and family. The community in Lorain treats the Breedlove family poorly and blames them for their own misfortune. Even Pecola's mother acts as if she does not exist.

When Pecola is impregnated by her father, shame and blame are placed on her alone; no one takes responsibility for the many ways that her family and community have failed her. At the end of the play, Claudia tells how the community continues to be indifferent towards Pecola's helplessness, saying:

A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror of the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment. A little black girl steps over into madness, a madness which protected her from us, simply because in the end it bored us.

Pecola imagines all along that people would love her if she had blue eyes, but by the time she believes she has blue eyes, she has retreated into her own private world. Pecola's community knows neither how to help her nor how to stop hurting her. The importance of Pecola's story is not that she, in particular, is failed by her community, but that she is representative of the vulnerability of all young black girls.



"I want them blue so people don't do ugly things in front of me and I stop being invisible."

Race and Beauty

Pecola equates blue eyes with the beauty and happiness of a white middle-class world to which she does not belong. She sees Shirley Temple, Mary Jane, Dick and Jane, the white girls at school, and even the little girl her mother cares for being treated nicely. When her parents fight, Pecola tries to will herself invisible. In her mind, she can make her body vanish, but never her eyes. For Pecola, those eyes are a reminder of what separates her from perfect, loveable Shirley Temple. She believes that teachers would be nice to her and her parents would not fight in front of her, if only she had blue eyes. She believes if she had blue eyes people would actually look at her instead of looking past her. Disappearing or having blue eyes, both impossible, are the only improvements Pecola sees available to her since all of her experiences of the possible have been overwhelming painful. Because of this, she redefines and retreats into a reality of her own that includes receiving blue eyes.

