

The Bluest Eye

The Author

Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio with the name Chloe Anthony Wofford, Morrison grew up in a family of four children. As Toni grew up and learned to read, she found herself constantly having her head in a book. She loved the way stories unfolded and how a book had the power to transport a reader to places normally unreachable. Toni's love for reading came partially from her father, George Wofford. Toni loved listening to her father tell folktales and stories; the stories her father told her gave her the love of storytelling that she has carried with her for her entire life.

Continuing to expand her thirst for knowledge, Toni attended Howard University in 1949; and after completing school there, she decided to continue her schooling even further at Cornell University in 1955.

By this time Toni had changed her name from "Chloe" to "Toni" because she thought it was too difficult for people to pronounce. She decided the shorter version of her middle name, "Anthony" was much better. Her last name "Morrison" came from her marriage in 1958 to Howard Morrison. In 1964, after having two children, Toni and Howard got a divorce.

She made her debut as a novelist in 1970 with *The Bluest Eye* and became widely recognized when she wrote *Song of Solomon*, the story of a young black man searching for his identity. Toni worked with many famous black authors, such as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones. She has contributed much to the awareness and acceptance of African American Literature, and continues to do so today at Princeton University. She has created a program called the "Princeton Atelier"; which is a collaborative effort between famous artists and students to produce amazing works of art. Morrison helps up-and-coming artists of all kinds with her valuable insight and support. And since 1981, she's been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 along with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.

After over 17 years of work at Princeton, and countless years of devotion to literature prior to that, Morrison announced her retirement in May 2006. Despite her retirement, Morrison plans to keep providing help to aspiring artist for many years to come.

Morrison says:

"If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

" In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate. "

" I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If

you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game. "

The Work

The *Bluest Eye* tells the story of the Breedloves, a poor black family living in Lorain, Ohio in the early 1940s. Each chapter tells something different -- the journey of the dad, Cholly, from curious young boy to a drunk and unloving father; the history of the mother, Pauline, and her dreams of movie stars and romance; and the childhood of the children, Sammy and Pecola, and how they deal with life as they've been given. Full of hardships and unfairness, the Breedloves have been through tough times most of their lives. And young Pecola's wishes of blue eyes and blonde hair in order to be loved and respected by others is a testament to the unjust world they lived in.

Critical Questions:

1. What does this novel seem to suggest or say about America?
2. The novel opens with an excerpt from an old-fashioned reading primer. The lines begin to blur and run together -- as they do at the beginning of select chapters. What social commentary is implicit in Morrison's superimposing these bland banalities describing a white family and its activities upon the tragic story of the destruction of a young black girl? How does Morrison's powerful language -- both highly specific and lyrical -- comment on the inadequacy of "correct" English and the way in which it masks and negates entire worlds of beauty and pain?
3. "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow." With these lines Morrison's child narrator, Claudia MacTeer, invites the reader into a troubling community secret: the incestuous rape of her 11-year-old friend Pecola Breedlove. What are the advantages of telling Pecola's story from a child's point of view?
4. The title of the novel refers to Pecola Breedlove's intense desire for blue eyes. She believes herself ugly and unworthy of love and respect, but is convinced that her life would be magically transformed if she possessed blue eyes. How does racial self-loathing corrode the lives of Pecola and her parents, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove? How does racial self-hatred manifest itself in characters like Maureen Peal, Geraldine, and Soaphead Church?
5. At a certain point in the novel, Morrison, through her narrator, states that romantic love and physical beauty are "probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought." How do the lives of individual characters bear out that statement? To what degree are these two concepts generated from within or imposed on us by society? Where do the characters first encounter ideas of romantic love and beauty -- ideas which will eventually torture and exclude them? What positive visions of beauty and love does the novel offer?
6. What role does social class play in the novel? Pecola first comes to stay with the MacTeers because her family has been put "outdoors" owing to her father's drunken violence and carelessness. The threat of "outdoors" focuses families like

- the MacTeers on upward mobility. "Being a minority in both caste and class we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the folds of the garment." Is divisiveness one result of this upward striving Morrison describes? What are others?
7. The novel is set in a Midwestern industrial town, Lorain, Ohio, Morrison's own birthplace. Pauline and Cholly Breedlove are transplanted Southerners and several key scenes in the novel are set in the South. How does Morrison set up comparisons between a Northern black community and the Southern black way of life? What values have been lost in the migration north?
 8. Consider Morrison's characterization of Cholly Breedlove. While she clearly condemns his actions, she resists dehumanizing him. If rape of one's daughter is an "unimaginable" crime, can one at least trace the events (and resulting emotions) that made it possible for Cholly to commit this brutal act? Is there a connection between the white hunters' "rape" of Cholly and the sexual aggression he eventually turned on his daughter?
 9. *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. At the time Morrison was writing the novel, the racist society that condemned Pecola Breedlove was still very much in place and Morrison took great risks -- both within the black community and American society as a whole -- to tell this important story. While advances in civil rights and racial attitudes have been made in the intervening years, it is arguable that many of the core issues so vividly evoked in the novel remain. What evidence is there that racial self-hatred continues to ruin lives? What present-day cultural factors could contribute to tragedies like Pecola's?