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The Bluest Eye
Toni Morrison

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The Bluest Eye
Toni Morrison



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

The Bluest Eye

Introduction

The Bluest Eye, 1970, is Morrison's first novel, and she set it in her hometown of Lorain, Ohio. It took her years to write, but was mostly overlooked by critics. In it, she calls attention to the issue of internalized racism; more specifically, black people hating themselves for failing to live up to white ideals of beauty and happiness.

The Bluest Eye tells the tale of Pecola Breedlove, a victim of family violence, poverty, and racial hatred, who longs to be truly loved. She believes blue eyes are the key to garnering love and happiness. After all, blacks and whites alike adore the blue-eyed Shirley Temple. Thus, Pecola, surrounded by poverty and hatred, renounces her own blackness and begins a descent into madness.

Claudia MacTeer, Pecola's well-adjusted schoolmate, narrates most of the story as a child caught up in the events of 1941, and later as an old woman looking back on them. In medias res, Morrison adeptly shifts to a third-person narrator, and allows some of the characters to recount details from their pasts. This makes even the most heinous character, Pecola's father who rapes her, somewhat sympathetic.

NOTE: In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison deals with mature subject matter such as incest, racial hatred, violence, adolescent sexual exploration, and prostitution. She uses racial slurs and curses. Moreover, she graphically describes incidental sex and Pecola's rape by her father.

To the Student

This journal will enable you to respond to *The Bluest Eye*. As you devote yourself to a close reading of the text, develop your own questions and observations. Try to identify the various motifs of the novel. Determine which are personal and which are universal. Ask yourself, what is Toni Morrison's attitude toward the motifs? What is her message?

The Bluest Eye

Autumn

7. When nine-year-old Claudia grows sick, her mother responds with anger, which leaves Claudia feeling humiliated. She is afraid to complain or ask for assistance, but she still feels her mother's concern for her. Despite feeling like she is an inconvenience, she feels loved.

Think about a time in your childhood when you experienced two different or opposing emotions simultaneously. Perhaps you were scared but courageous; perhaps you were embarrassed, yet proud. Write a diary entry detailing your experience.

8. In this section alone, Morrison references five stars: Greta Garbo, Ginger Rogers, Bojangles, Shirley Temple, and Jane Withers. She also mentions Raggedy Ann, Vicks, Alaga Syrup, Sen-Sen Mints, and Nu Nile Hair Oil. All of these references lend authenticity to the narrative.

Thirty years from now, what pop culture icons and items from the present might find their way into a book? Imagine writers of the future must depend on a time capsule assembled by you. What items would you want them to remember, and why?

9. Claudia's illness, and the realization that her family loves her, has a profound impact upon her. For the rest of her life she connects it with fall. Morrison writes, "So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die."

When you think of autumn, what comes to mind? Write a poem that begins with the phrase "When I think of autumn..."

The Bluest Eye

29. So far, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison addresses internal racism, prejudice, classism, and the negative effects of blacks internalizing white standards of beauty and happiness. She proves that fiction can be a powerful way to communicate moral or ethical messages.

Write a persuasive essay either supporting or refuting one of the following statements:

- Racism in America is declining.
 - Classism does not exist in America.
 - Young black girls are the most vulnerable members of American society.
30. The calm clean appearance of Junior's home deceives Pecola. Of course, she soon learns that the pleasant façade hides a house full of hatred. Unfortunately, Junior directs the anger he feels towards his cold mother Geraldine right at Pecola, in the form of Geraldine's cat. Geraldine then directs her self-hatred at Pecola in the form of screamed obscenities and racial slurs.

Think about a time when someone or something deceived you with a false outward appearance. Describe the incident. How did it transpire? How did it make you feel?

Think about a time when you were the victim of someone's misdirected anger. Describe the incident and how it made you feel.

The Bluest Eye

Wrap-Up

51. In *The Bluest Eye*, people discriminate against Claudia and Pecola because they are girls, because they are black, and because they are poor. Of these three prejudices, which do you think is the hardest for each of them to face? Which do you think you would find the most difficult?
52. As you have discovered, *The Bluest Eye* contains mature themes. Parents are often concerned about exposing students to this type of content. Why do you suppose that is?

Imagine a group of parents wants to ban *The Bluest Eye* from the school library. Write an argumentative letter to your school board either supporting or defending their efforts.

53. Some of the characters in *The Bluest Eye* have lost the will to live long before they die. It is unclear whether Soaphead Church merely falls asleep or dies in his bed. However, Morrison writes that Pecola's baby is stillborn, and that her father dies in a workhouse.

Write an obituary or an epitaph for any one of the characters in the novel. Think about what others would say about you when you die. What things would you like them to say? Write your own obituary or epitaph.

54. Claudia and Frieda sing and say magic words over the marigold seeds. They believe they can make the seeds grow by wanting it, by sacrificing for it, and by ritualizing it.

Think about a time when you wanted something desperately. If you could have sacrificed to get it, what would you have given up? Drawing on your own experience, what rituals do children perform when they want something badly?