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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The Bluest Eye

by Toni Morrison

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the ways the quotations from the primer at the start of the chapters represent the collective voice of society.
2. infer information about characters and events when it is not explicitly stated.
3. discuss what the following may represent in the story: milk, the quilt, the Shirley Temple cup, Pauline's foot, the color green, marigolds, and Mary Jane candy bars.
4. recognize Morrison's writing style, which includes interesting descriptive phrases and images.
5. recognize when the narrator changes from Claudia (first person narration) to third person narration; discuss the advantages of each type of narration for this story.
6. define vocabulary words from the story.
7. discuss the importance of family love to help black children overcome or resist the social forces that promote racial self-loathing.
8. define and cite examples from *The Bluest Eye* of the following literary terms:
 - metaphor
 - simile
 - symbol
 - irony
 - folklore
 - theme
 - parallelism
 - allusion
 - omniscient
9. relate the ways each of the following characters try to escape from their unhappy lives: Cholly, Pecola, Sammy, Mrs. Breedlove, The Maginot Line, Geraldine, Soaphead Church; comment on whether or not they succeed.
10. discuss the reasons Pecola wishes for blue eyes.
11. understand the overall theme of the novel: how the collective voice of society, which tells black people they must adhere to unattainable white standards and expectations, is destructive to black people, and results in racial self-loathing; explain how the theme impacts Pecola's relationship with the black community, her family life, her friendships, her sexuality, and her sanity.
12. comment on the significance of the fact that the four parts of the novel correspond with the four seasons of the year.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. State the overall theme for this novel.
2. What do the reading primer passages at the beginning of chapters represent in this story? Why are the phrases of the primer repeated and run together?
3. The second short section (referred to in this unit as a “prologue”) begins with the sentence, “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941.” What information about the story does this beginning give to the reader about the setting and tone or mood of the story?
4. Marigolds are also mentioned in the last two chapters of the story. What do you think they might symbolize in this novel? Explain how the symbolism of marigolds and other symbols add to the overall mood or tone of *The Bluest Eye*.
5. What do each of the following items represent in the story?
 - three quarts of milk
 - the quilt
 - the Shirley Temple cup
 - Pauline’s foot
 - Mary Jane candy bars
6. Who narrates the chapters in the book describing Cholly’s childhood and Pauline’s childhood? Which chapters does Claudia narrate? Why do you think Morrison switches between the two narrators?
7. What does the color green symbolize in the story? Find two passages in the novel to support your answer.
8. Both Pecola and Frieda experience sexual abuse. Why does Frieda seem to survive the abuse with her emotions intact; why does Pecola go insane?
9. Pecola prays for blue eyes. Why does she think blue eyes will improve her life?
10. How do the black women in the community feel about Pecola after her rape?
11. Why is it ironic that Cholly covers Pecola with a quilt after the rape?

The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye – Prologues 1 and 2 (“Here is the house... Quiet as it’s kept...”)

1. The first two pages in the prologue repeat lines from the children’s reading book, *Fun With Dick And Jane*, a primer popular in schools during the 1940’s and 1950’s. The primer describes incidents from the lives of a perfect white family made up of mother, father, son, daughter, and dog; most black children also had to learn to read using this book. Some critics believe the primer Morrison uses in this story represents the collective voice of the dominant white culture. Assuming this theory is accurate, what message do you think this allusion to the elementary school book might be sending to young black students?

2. Why do you suppose Morrison repeats the words from the elementary school primer over and over without any punctuation?

3. The first line in the second prologue is “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941.” Morrison has said that this line reminds her of her childhood. She remembers hearing black women use that expression before relating a piece of gossip or an anecdote. To Morrison, it means, “Shh, don’t tell anyone else.” What secret about Pecola does the narrator reveal in the second prologue?

Chapter 2 (HEREISTHEHOUSE)

VOCABULARY

discretion – freedom to make decisions and choices
foists – passes off as genuine
leaden – gloomy, dull, gray
malaise – uneasiness, depression
melancholy – sadness, gloom
pervading – occurring throughout
schemata – schedule, scheme

1. Briefly describe Pecola’s apartment. What is ironic about her last name?

2. Why is the sofa a source of humiliation for the Breedlove family? Some critics believe the sofa represents something about the Breedlove family.

3. Claudia is the narrator for the first chapter. Why do you suppose Morrison switches from first-person narration to third-person narration for this chapter?

4. How does Maureen’s family get some of their money?

5. Compare the way Frieda and Claudia react to Maureen’s insults with Pecola’s reaction. Who do you think handles the situation better?

6. Consider the descriptions of Maureen below. In what way do they each support the theme that black children’s racial self-worth is damaged or destroyed when they are forced to accept white values and expectations?

She [Maureen] ran down the street, the green knee socks making her legs look like wild dandelion stems that had somehow lost their heads.” “A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back.

7. Claudia describes how she and Frieda feel after fighting with Maureen:

And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us.

What *Thing* is Claudia referring to?

8. Why do Frieda and Claudia decide to keep Mr. Henry’s secret?

SPRING

Chapter 1

VOCABULARY

supple – flexible

1. Who narrates the first chapter in this section? How does she feel about spring?

2. Why does Frieda want to get some whiskey to drink?

3. What do Claudia's mother and father do to Mr. Henry?

4. Compare the way Mrs. Breedlove treats her daughter when Pecola spills the blueberry pie with the way she treats the little white girl who lives in the house. What message does Mrs. Breedlove's behavior send to Pecola? Why is it significant that the little white girl calls Mrs. Breedlove Polly?

5. Define hyperbole. Find an example in this chapter.

6. What can you infer from the last paragraph in the chapter?
