

Excerpt from *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*

By: Missy Dehn Kubitschek

Morrison's first novel establishes both thematic and technical elements that remain important in her later works. The novel realistically explores a black community in a particular time and place -- Lorain, Ohio, in the 1940s -- and shows that the events there result from wider social realities of racism and poverty. At the same time, the novel connects its characters and events to the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. Morrison's later works share this concentration on African American characters and community, and several connect ordinary people and happenings to the larger-than-life patterns of myths.

To explore these subjects, the novel uses a complex blend of narration from an omniscient narrator (one who knows all the characters' thoughts and histories) and a retrospective first-person narrator (in this case, an adult remembering her childhood). As in Morrison's other works, the narration does not proceed in the straightforward chronological order of the events told, but instead moves back and forth in time.

The Bluest Eye shows racism's damaging effects on the black community at large and on black families. As the black community and individual black people absorb the wider culture's racist pictures of themselves, they focus their self-hatred on the most vulnerable character, twelve-year-old Pecola Breedlove. Pecola's tragedy, then, is the culmination of many other tragedies. However, *The Bluest Eye* also contains stories of perseverance and survival. One of these survivors is the first person narrator, Claudia MacTeer. Through Claudia and the omniscient narrator, Morrison sings a song of praise and grief for all the Pecolas of the world.

SOCIAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

The Bluest Eye shares concerns with the two most powerful social forces in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, the Black Power movement and the feminist movement. This period saw the rise of two major organizations of African American political power. Martin Luther King, Jr. headed a Christian, nonviolent, and desegregationist movement that worked through boycotts and demonstrations. Malcolm X espoused a Muslim, separatist philosophy that supported "any means necessary" for self-defense.

As a result of these movements, America's social landscape changed substantially from 1950 to 1970. The civil rights movement culminated in new laws -- the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act. The Voting Rights Act used Federal power to break a century-old system by which Southern states had prevented African Americans from registering to vote. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended "Jim Crow" laws -- separate schools, restaurants, seating on buses, even separate rest rooms for blacks and whites. (Although these separate facilities were supposed to be "separate but equal," in fact the funding was never comparable, and frequently no facilities at all

were provided for African Americans.) By the end of the 1960s, both Malcolm X and King had been assassinated, and the power of their movements had declined. Focusing on a different kind of social and cultural change, African Americans worked to analyze their cultural heritage and its contributions to American civilization. Toni Morrison's editorial work on *The Black Book* (see Chapter 1) typifies this ongoing reclamation of African American history and culture. As African American students claimed a heritage worthy of study, universities formally recognized their culture's existence and integrity with Black Studies programs.

Women's Studies programs developed at about the same time, a product of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The feminist movement worked for changes in women's economic opportunities and social roles in general. The early movement had three main goals: (1) achieving reproductive rights such as contraception and abortion, (2) ending gender discrimination in jobs, and (3) stopping violence against women. Soon, splits between the interests of white middle class women and African American women of all classes became increasingly obvious. Though all women faced economic discrimination, for example, African American women's opportunities were largely restricted to factory and farm work or domestic labor such as housecleaning and laundering.

Working from different historical experiences and viewpoints, as well as different economic positions, white and black women naturally looked at social roles from divergent perspectives. To claim middle-class white male economic opportunities, white women leaders attacked traditional roles that had made the rearing of children and homemaking their only proper activities. This role had been an option only for middle class white women, however, and what they perceived as a domestic trap seemed an unimaginable luxury for working class white women and women of color. Although the feminist movement was slow to acknowledge its racism and class bias, it did focus public attention on the experiences of women.

Like the Black Power movement, feminism sought to change both laws and culture. Examining universities' offerings, feminists found that courses in history, anthropology, sociology, literature, and medicine often ignored women altogether or offered only stereotypes. As feminism demanded better books by and about women, publishers responded with many new titles in fiction, biography, and autobiography. The call for a new scholarship that would examine women's historical roles and contributions to culture developed into Women's Studies programs.

Black Studies and Women's Studies thus revised university courses. As part of this ongoing creative re-examination, scholars have in the last twenty-five years rediscovered many previously lost or undervalued materials. Oxford University Press, for instance, has published twenty-five volumes of literary works by African American women -- works from the nineteenth century, when for more than fifty years, it was a crime for African Americans to learn to read or write.

Literature as well as politics developed both black separatist and feminist movements. In the early 1960s, the Black Arts movement denounced traditional European and Anglo-American forms and techniques as inappropriate for African American experience. These forms did not develop, they argued, to express African American experience and would therefore distort it. The Black Arts movement called on artists to develop new forms for the new themes of black experience, and to create art that would have an immediate political effect. In *Black Art*, for instance, Maulana Karenga called for art to "expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution" (*Norton Anthology of African American Literature* 1974). In its commitment to "expose," this art carried on the tradition of black protest literature.

At the same time, considerable feminist literature critiqued male presentations of traditional subjects or introduced new subjects. Female characters emerged from their traditional secondary positions -- the main male character's mother, wife, mistress, or child -- to heroines in their own right. As women writers presented female physical experiences previously considered unpublishable, fiction began to include menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, and sexuality. Much of this literature protested against the legal and social constraints on women's development.

In joining the Black Arts and feminist protests against racist and sexist injustice, *The Bluest Eye* significantly expanded American literature. Before 1970, American novels about racism had concentrated on adults and literature about incest had remained almost entirely on a symbolic level. *The Bluest Eye* expands these treatments in two ways. First, it analyzes the destructive psychological effects of racism on both children and adults. Second, it explores familial rape much more thoroughly and realistically than earlier novels. In its brilliant synthesis, *The Bluest Eye* shows the interconnectedness of racism, psychological damage, and rape.

The novel develops the emotional rationale for some of the cultural changes sought by the political movements of the 1960s. Activists called for black dolls, for example, to help African American children build self-esteem. The "Black is beautiful" movement enlarged on this idea, advocating pride in black skin and African or African American features. In *The Bluest Eye*, the absence of black dolls -- and the inescapable presence of white ones -- is presented as part of what makes the main character, Pecola, feel invisible. Further, the novel presents the emotional consequences of identifying ugliness with blackness, and clearly shows that too many beautiful, unique black children are destroyed by racist aesthetics.

Focusing on a twelve-year-old African American girl was an inherently feminist choice because few adult books up to 1970 had considered girls' lives important enough to be a novel's central interest. *The Bluest Eye* delineates how Pecola is repeatedly exposed to psychological violation, and how physical violation completes the psychological

destruction. Significantly, this physical violation -- rape -- is a crime brought to the nation's consciousness by the feminist movement.

Nevertheless, *The Bluest Eye* diverges from what critics call protest literature in important ways. Historically, African American protest literature addressed largely white audiences. Antislavery literature, for example, had to speak to those with legal power rather than to slaves. For that reason, white characters generally figure prominently in such works. In addition, protest literature has often focused on the necessity for a particular political change, an end to slavery or an end to job discrimination, for instance. To reach a wide audience, such works have often been made as simple as possible in literary technique.

Morrison's choices for *The Bluest Eye* stand outside or at least extend considerably the conventional protest novel. The novel's political agenda is not simple because the cultural malaise that it depicts cannot be addressed with a mere law or two. And though the white world generates the racism whose destructive effects are examined, white characters play very minor roles, appearing in only two scenes. However, the black community has internalized the racist standards that these white characters represent. As a result, the community destroys its own most vulnerable members. Finally, although the novel's narrative technique is accessible to many readers, it does not present events chronologically, as most protest novels do. Instead, *The Bluest Eye* uses techniques of involved flashbacks and a cyclical return to particular events.

The social and literary movements of the 1960s provide a context for understanding this novel, but they certainly do not explain it. *The Bluest Eye* focuses on issues of its time, but develops them with transcendent psychological profundity and moral intensity. *The Bluest Eye* goes beyond the mindset of its own time to establish many of the basic terms for subsequent discussions of racism and psychology.

GENRE AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison expands a conventional literary genre, the *bildungsroman*. A *bildungsroman* recounts how an individual, often an extraordinary person, grows up. The *bildungsroman* has sometimes focused on artists, for example, or on especially intelligent or virtuous heroes. Novels focused on more ordinary people often show a world in which their characters are the victims of powerful social or natural forces; individual personality is not the focus. (These novels belong to the literary movement called naturalism.) In *Pecola and Claudia*, *The Bluest Eye* focuses on ordinary African American girls and claims for them the status of earlier heroines in the *bildungsroman*. At the same time that it illustrates the girls' struggles with the social forces of racism and poverty, the novel embraces individual personality by detailed characterization. The destruction of Pecola's personality is the novel's tragedy; the survival of Claudia's personality, its triumph.

The novel opens with two prologues. In the first, the omniscient narrator foreshadows the progressive destruction of Pecola Breedlove by showing how a familiar story appears to her at three different times. This story -- about Mother and Father and their children Dick, Jane, and Sally -- comes from primers, books used to teach children to read during the 1940s and 1950s in the United States and Canada. The first telling of the story uses standard spaces and punctuation. The second uses much smaller spaces between the words and omits both capital letters and punctuation, so that the sentences run together. The third version runs together not only the sentences but the words. The breakdown of order in the language of the story suggests the breakdown of order in Pecola's mind. Various parts of the third version of the story reappear throughout the novel to highlight the contrast between Pecola's family experiences and those of the primer's idealized white family.

The second prologue comes from Claudia MacTeer's consciousness. Claudia tells the reader Pecola's eventual fate and suggests that her tragedy corresponds to an interruption of nature's cycle, a spring season in which nothing grows. Noting that the why of Pecola's fate is hard to deal with, Claudia decides to tell only how it occurred. In this way, Morrison's narrative technique tells readers to find the why in the how.

Four sections -- "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring," and "Summer" -- follow the prologues. Like the prologues, these developmental sections alternate between two viewpoints. Claudia MacTeer speaks in first-person ("I") about experiences in her childhood, particularly those connected with Pecola Breedlove. The omniscient narrator tells the reader about events that Claudia could not have seen (such as happenings in the Breedlove house) or things that Claudia could not have known (the history of Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly, for example). Omniscient narration also lets us know what characters are thinking. In "Summer," for instance, the reader overhears what appears to be a conversation between Pecola and another child. The dialogue is printed in italics, however, to distinguish it from other conversations because Pecola is alone. The omniscient narrator has taken the reader into Pecola's thoughts. Driven to insanity by her unmet need for love, Pecola has invented a companion for herself. The italicized dialogue records Pecola's conversation with this imaginary friend. The omniscient narration provides the reader with a descriptive and analytical context for Claudia's personal, emotional memories.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT

As part of the overall contrast between one girl's survival and another's destruction, each seasonal section of the novel includes materials about Claudia MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove. Every section either presents their experiences directly or explores the reasons that their experiences diverge. "Autumn" shows the relationships within the MacTeer family and those in the Breedlove family. In "Winter," both narrators' stories testify to racist damage to the African American community. That community then unconsciously uses internalized racist standards to psychologically injure Pecola. "Spring" has a dual function. First, it shows the vulnerability of the

young girls to a largely brutal environment. Second, it explores the histories of the surrounding adults who both make up that environment and are the girls' only protection from it. The shortest section, "Summer," presents the fruition of the circumstances detailed in the preceding three seasons.

"Autumn" contrasts the MacTeer and the Breedlove households, family environments that encourage Claudia and doom Pecola. This contrast is heightened when Pecola stays with Claudia's family for a few days after the Breedloves are evicted from their home. Although Morrison's presentation contrasts the two girls' childhoods, it does not make them into opposites. Pecola's experience is a nightmare, but Claudia's memories of her childhood do not resemble the sugar-candy lives of the children in the Dick-Jane-Sally story. Instead, she remembers that her parents, like all others of that time and place, were verbally rough with their children. She recounts, for example, her mother's rant when Pecola drinks an entire quart of milk -- a serious strain on the MacTeer budget. However, Claudia also remembers her parents' emotional commitment to her and her older sister Frieda, a commitment that the Breedloves are incapable of making to the unlucky Pecola.

The omniscient narrator shows the barrenness of the Breedloves' family life, and its origins in racism. The Breedloves do not love themselves or one another. Pecola asks a question that does not generally occur to children who are loved: "I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" (29). In accounts presented as typical of African American experience, the novel depicts a furniture store forcing the Breedloves to accept damaged goods, for example. In another instance, when Pecola buys candy, the white shopkeeper will not even touch her hand to take her money. These experiences destroy the Breedloves' confidence in themselves. Gradually they accept racism's message that they are ugly and inferior.

The African American community as a whole shares these racist experiences, but some have supports that the particularly vulnerable Breedloves lack. The community senses the Breedloves' self-hatred and encourages it by agreeing that the Breedloves are ugly. This cycle of mutually reinforcing communal disapproval and self-hatred climaxes in "Summer." In "Autumn" the Breedlove family as a whole is scapegoated, but in "Summer," when Pecola alone is chosen as scapegoat, her personality collapses into insanity.

"Winter" depicts the black community's internalization of white racist standards, and their effects on Pecola. Claudia recounts the community's idolatry of Maureen Peal, a light-skinned, middle-class child. Significantly, Maureen first befriends and then verbally attacks Pecola. The omniscient narrator shows Geraldine, the middle-class mother of Junior (one of Pecola's schoolmates), projecting on Pecola everything that she is ashamed of, everything that whites use to despise African Americans. When Pecola visits Junior, Geraldine separates the children by throwing Pecola out of their home.

In "Spring" Claudia briefly narrates what happens when the MacTeers' lodger, Mr. Henry, gropes at her sister Frieda's breasts. When Frieda tells her parents, they are enraged and throw Mr. Henry out of their house. Claudia and Frieda believe that they must get Frieda some alcohol, the only force they can think of that will preserve Frieda from being "ruined" (a 1940s euphemism for sexual experience). Their quest for liquor is one of the novel's few comic notes.

The omniscient narrator relates Pecola's far more serious experience of sexual assault. Raped by her father and emotionally abandoned by her mother, Pecola falls prey to Soaphead Church, who promises her what she thinks will make her lovable, blue eyes.

To tell how the Breedlove parents come to fail their daughter Pecola, the omniscient narrator explores their histories and the development of their marriage. Cholly, Pecola's father, has never been part of a family, and he suffers an early, specifically sexual racist humiliation. Pauline, Pecola's mother, also suffers from isolation. Although she comes from a functional family, she loses both that family and the southern black community when she and Cholly move North in search of economic opportunity. Although Cholly and Pauline initially love one another, their love cannot withstand poverty, racism, and isolation from the community. Too countrified to fit into Northern urban women's circles, Pauline spends most of her time at the movies. From these films, she absorbs racist ideas of female beauty and learns to dislike her own appearance. When she looks at her new-born daughter, Pauline "knewed she [the baby] was ugly" (100), for she sees herself in her child.

Emotionally abandoning her own family, Pauline creates an alternate, fantasy-family from her workplace. Pauline does domestic work for a white family, the Fishers. At their home, she has access to beautiful material goods; as their servant, she can use their status to deal with tradespeople who do not respect her in her own right. Pauline's emotional loyalties lie with the white children rather than with her own. When Pecola accidentally makes a mess and burns herself, Pauline knocks her down and runs to comfort the white child frightened by the commotion. Appropriately, Pecola has been trained to call Pauline by a name that does not make emotional claims. To her daughter, Pauline is not "Mother" but "Mrs. Breedlove."

The wider community also fails Pecola. Having absorbed the idea that she is ugly, and knowing that she is unloved, Pecola desperately wants the blue eyes that she understands will make a child lovable in American society. She takes her request to Soaphead Church, a fake conjure man. Because his experience of growing up in the West Indies resembles Cholly and Pauline's experience in the United States, he too lacks a solid sense of self. In fact, Soaphead has so little confidence that he can function sexually only with little girls. Nevertheless, he recognizes how racism has damaged Pecola. Unlike Cholly and Pauline, Soaphead can articulate what has happened to him,

and to Pecola. In a grotesquely humorous counterpart to Claudia's narration, he expresses his outrage at racism in a letter to God.

In the first scene of "Summer," Claudia remembers the disastrous events leading to Pecola's madness. The community condemns Cholly, Pecola's father, for raping his twelve-year-old daughter. But the same community also ostracizes her, claiming that she must be guilty in some way. Frieda and Claudia share the community's attitude toward Pecola, but they try to protect her baby by casting a spell. Naturally, their efforts do not succeed. (As the reader knows from the beginning of Claudia's narration in "Autumn," the baby dies.) In the next scene, the point of view shifts from Claudia to the omniscient narrator. Entering Pecola's mind, the reader overhears a conversation. Although the dialogue sounds like a discussion between Pecola and another real person, no one else is present. Pecola has become insane. Lacking love from her family and her community, she has created an imaginary friend who seems real to her.

In the final passage, the viewpoint again moves back to Claudia. An adult now, Claudia considers the lasting damage to Pecola. In a symbolic representation of her ongoing isolation, the still-crazy Pecola continues to live at the edge of the town that rejected her. Seeing her, Claudia meditates on the community's -- and her own -- participation in Pecola's tragedy.