

ANALYSIS

The Bluest Eye (1970)

Toni Morrison

(1931-)

“Shoemakers’ children go barefoot, we are told. And physicians must be reminded to heal themselves. What happens to editors who write novels? The question is not academic, as Toni Morrison is an editor with a New York publishing firm, and this is her first novel. She reveals herself, when she shucks the fuzziness born of flights of poetic imagery, as a writer of considerable power and tenderness, someone who can cast back to the living, bleeding heart of childhood and capture it on paper. But Miss Morrison has gotten lost in her construction.

The title pinpoints the focus of her book. Pecola Breedlove, in her first year of womanhood, is black, ugly and poor, living in a store front, sharing a bedroom with her brother, her crippled mother and her drunken father. Pregnant by her father, she goes to Soaphead Church, a man who believes himself possessed of holy powers. What she wants are blue eyes. In this scene, in which a young black on the verge of madness seeks beauty and happiness in a wish for a white girl’s eyes, the author makes her most telling statement on the tragic effect of race prejudice on children. But the scene occurs late in the novel—far too late to achieve the impact it might have had in a different construction. For most of the way, Pecola yields center stage to Frieda and Claudia—who, aside from knowing her, and perhaps offering contrast, by themselves being black and poor (though from a happier home), serve little purpose beyond distraction.

Claudia tells the story part way into each of the four seasonal divisions of the book. From her, the narratives branch out to assorted portraits and events throughout the black community of Lorraine, Ohio, with Pecola, whose story this eventually is, too often playing a secondary role until the novel zeroes in on her for the ending. Her mental breakdown, when it comes, has only the impact of reportage. Miss Morrison never bores as she wanders around town. There are vivid scenes: Pecola’s first ‘ministratin’; a ‘pretty milk-brown lady’ driving Pecola from her home for the killing of a cat, by the woman’s own son; the young Cholly Breedlove (later to be Pecola’s father) caught during the sex act by white men and being forced to continue for their amusement. Given a scene that demands a writer’s best, Miss Morrison responds with control and talent.

Yet there are moments when the mind stops and questions. The novel begins: ‘Nuns go by as quiet as lust...’ (How quiet is lust? Is it always?) Or: ‘...he will not unrazor his lips until spring.’ Does that mean he will not shave around his mouth all winter? And just what is ‘an ivory sleep’? With the flaws and virtues tallied, I found myself still in favor of *The Bluest Eye*. There are many novelists willing to report the ugliness of the world as ugly. The writer who can reveal the beauty and the hope beneath the surface is a writer to seek out and to encourage.”

Haskel Frankel
The New York Times Book Review
(1 November 1970)

“Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* couldn’t be more different. She is dealing with children, not men; she is dealing with the forties, not the present; she is dealing with the black subculture, not the military one. But the biggest different is that she is dealing with people to whom no ultimate glory is possible. (One of her characters thinks, ‘There is sure to be a glory’—but that, pointedly, is in the afterlife.) She writes, affectingly and often in the freshest, simplest, and most striking prose, of young Frieda and Claudia McTeer (Claudia is the narrator) and their friend Pecola, who is growing up with them in the steelmaking Cleveland suburb of Lorraine in 1941.

Pecola feels that blue eyes are a talisman of whiteness, of pride, of security, and she seeks them through prayer, through the intercession of a spoiled priest who has become a ‘reader and advisor,’ and, ultimately,

through madness, when she believes blue eyes have been granted her. In carrying the reader through this short and tragic story, Miss Morrison carefully and powerfully builds up the dossiers of Pecola and the people around her: her father, Cholly Breedlove, driven to alcoholism, brutality, and incest by a life of appalling oppression and dislocation; her mother, Pauline Williams, driven back into her bitter and hard-bitten self by Cholly's rage and by the unbearable misery of her life; Soaphead Church, the 'reader and advisor,' who, having turned his back on life and become a quasi-hermit, finds that he has almost godlike power over the lives of others; Frieda and Claudia, whose life is only marginally less hopeless than the Breedloves'.

She gives us a fresh, close look at the lives of terror and decorum of those Negroes who want to get on in a white man's world—Negroes who would now be scorned as Uncle Toms; she puts her compassionate finger on the role of crude fantasy in sustaining hope, as in the experiences of Pecola's mother.... Here again we see, as the overriding motif of this book, the desirability of whiteness, or, as the next-best thing, the imitation of whiteness; as a corollary, blackness is perceived as ugliness, a perception that must surely have given rise in later years to the over-compensatory counter-statement 'Black is beautiful.'

The Bluest Eye is not flawless. Miss Morrison's touching and disturbing picture of the doomed youth of her race is marred by an occasional error of fact or judgment. She places the story in a frame of the bland white words of a conventional school 'reader'—surely an unnecessary and unsubtle irony. She writes an occasional false or bombastic line" 'They were through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror.' She permits herself some inconsistencies: the real name of Soaphead Church is given as both Elihue Micah Whitcomb and Micah Elihue Whitcomb. None of this matters, though, beside her real and greatly promising achievement: to write truly (and sometimes very beautifully) of every generation of blacks—the young, their parents, their rural grandparents—in this country thirty years ago, and, I'm afraid, today."

L. E. Sissman
The New Yorker
(23 January 1971)

"I've just finished reading Toni Morrison's book, *The Bluest Eye* and my heart hurts. It's all I can do not to lie down and cry myself into some kind of relief from the life-pain of Pecola, the central character. She is a girl born black, poor and, by majority standard, ugly. It is also an account of the people that surround her, especially Pauline, her mother and Cholly, her father. They are the kind of people that all black people know of—or are—to varying degrees. The author digs up for viewing deep secret thoughts, terrible yearnings and little-understood frustrations common to many of us. She says these are the gnawings we keep pushed back into the subconscious, unadmitted; but they must be worked on, ferreted up and out so we can breathe deeply, say loud and truly believe 'Black is beautiful.'

Pecola, soon after entering young womanhood, is raped by her father, and goes quietly mad into the fantasy world of her newly acquired blue eyes. Pauline, her mother, finds haven, hope, life and meaning as servant to the white, blond, blue-eyed, clean, rich, family to which she dedicates her love and her respect for an orderly life that poverty does not afford. From her kitchen throne, she comes to view the reality of her own family with disgust and almost hatred.

Cholly knew his father for one day. He learned about caring through his grandmother who died when he was a boy. Loving, mischievous, romantic, searching and with the resiliency common to youth, we watch him decay into middle age. He tries in one drunken moment to recapture the poetry—dimly remembered—when his soul was first moved. He had heard the poetry for the first time with Pauline and tried to capture it again from time to time. This time he tries with Pecola, his own daughter. It is around and through Pecola, the scorned and rejected girl who longs to be beautiful and to be loved, that most of the main characters plod through a desperate, pitiful search for meaning and personal definition.

Toni Morrison has not written a story really, but a series of painfully accurate impressions. How all of the people she talks about arrive where we meet them is what she is about with such great precision. She gives us a sense of some of the social elements of some of the people, black and white that contribute to the erosion of innocence and beauty. To read the book, however, is to ache for remedy. In *The Bluest Eye* she

has split open the person and made us watch the heart beat. We feel faint, helpless and afraid—not knowing what to do to cover it up and keep it beating. We think of remedies past and remedies in progress to apply somehow while the thrashing heart still beats. We must think faster and work harder and hope that maybe a new breed of people, tight with God, in some dark privacy, has a plan ready to set it all—alright.”

Ruby Dee
Freedomways 11
(3rd quarter 1971) 319-20

“In *The Bluest Eye*, narrator Claudia...recognized the diversion of feeling from her self and world into white values, emphasized by repeated references to white dolls, babies, and movie stars.... As a child, she says, she hated Shirley Temple...the black woman is ‘the antithesis of American beauty.’ No efforts at disguise will make them into the images they learn to admire. Defined as the Other, made to be looked at, they can never satisfy the gaze of society. Because they are doubly defined as failures and outsiders, they are natural scapegoats for those seeking symbols of displaced emotions.

Morrison shows the Look taking on monstrous proportions as the humiliated black male allies himself with [the whites] by making the black woman the object of his displaced fury. So Cholly Breedlove, in his sexual humiliation, looks not at his tormenters, but at his partner, with hatred... Morrison shows the displacement of male humiliation onto the only person left that a black man can ‘own’—the black woman.... [At the same time] even black women can find scapegoats. The prime example is Pecola, black and young and ugly.... Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects. In this world, light-skinned women can feel superior to dark ones, married women to whores, and on and on.”

Cynthia A. Davis
“Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction”
Contemporary Literature 23.3
(Summer 1982) 323-42

“Morrison arranges the novel so that each of its sections provides a bitter gloss on key phrases from the novel’s preface, a condensed version of the Dick and Jane reader. These phrases...describe the [American] cultural ideal of the healthy, supportive, well-to-do family. The seven central elements of Jane’s world—house, family, cat, Mother, father, dog, and friend—become, in turn, plot elements, but only after they are inverted to fit the realities of Pecola’s world.”

Raymond Hedin
“The Structuring of Emotion in Black American Fiction”
Novel 16.1 (Fall 1982) 50

“For the black Pecola, at eleven, in *The Bluest Eye*, the goal of her life is to have blue eyes—that is, to be white, blue-eyed, golden-haired. She does gain these qualities, by substituting for actuality the ‘movie’ version of herself. Real life is something else, for Pecola serves as witness to a marriage distinguished by its disintegration. The Breedloves define themselves by their hostility and combativeness, in a union founded on physical aggression. Until she is made pregnant by her father, Cholly, who has intercourse with her twice, Pecola is ignored. In Morrison’s presentation, Pecola has no way out except in fantasy. At eleven, her life is fixed.

The novel is more a series of vignettes than a coherent narrative. One vignette concerns the sadistic Louis Junior, whose mother ‘did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identified. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group.’ Although Morrison is writing about how blacks perceive themselves, we note how this distinction applies, also, to other groups. German Jews saw themselves as ‘colored,’ while they perceived Eastern European Jews as ‘niggers’; with Italians, the distinction was between those who came from north of Rome and those from Naples, or between Neapolitans and Sicilians. In an earlier period, the English applied a comparable image to the Irish when they immigrated to America.

Louis Junior is only ironically a member of a super race, for he turns out to be pathological, injuring his cat severely and then accusing Pecola. Another vignette concerns Elihue Micah Whitcomb, who seems an outgrowth of a Carson McCullers or Flannery O'Connor character. He is a freaky young man who likes young girls and yet is asexual, an outcast with repulsive qualities. It is to him that Pecola comes for her blue eyes, and he writes a long letter to God, in which among other things he speaks of the breasts of little girls. This man 'causes a miracle,' and Pecola will have her blue eyes: 'No one else will see her blue eyes. But *she* will.'

The book as a whole is a youthful piece of work, a novelist trying out some images and episodes which will locate her young characters and which, later, will deepen and intensify. The scenes all shift into and out of Pecola, demonstrating victimization by her immediate community (parents, neighbors, friends, cruel boys) and by a culture beyond which she never observes, that of the white world. She is, in effect, given a role whose control comes from a direction she cannot begin to perceive... She has no codes to decipher, only the fantasy of blue eyes."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 434-35

"In *The Bluest Eye* (1970) the destructiveness of control rather than the creativity of negation predominates. Pecola Breedlove, a black girl thought by everyone to be ugly, finds herself enthralled by the blue eyes of Shirley Temple. Everywhere in her world, white skin and blue eyes are taken as signs of beauty. The image manifests itself in movies, billboards, children's drinking cups, Mary Jane candies, other characters, and in the excerpts from a primary-school reader that constitute both epigraph and chapter titles in the novel. Conversely, the lack of such traits in Pecola leads her and virtually everyone else in the book to consider her worthless. Black children deflect their self-hatred by verbally assaulting her; lighter-skinned blacks, children and adults, proclaim their superiority by alternately patronizing and attacking her; and her own mother makes clear her preferences when she slaps Pecola aside in order to comfort a white child.

In response to this psychological violence, Pecola takes up a quest for blue eyes. Initially, she limits herself to drinking white milk from a cup with a Shirley Temple deal and to buying and eating Mary Jane candies. Through this popular-culture Eucharist, she hopes to be transubstantiated from common black clay into spiritual whiteness. At this stage, she achieves only the momentary happiness of seeing the white faces and wishing to have one. Later on, after the trauma of being raped by her father, she loses all sense of reality, visits a self-styled conjure man, and believes that she has actually undergone the change in eye color that she so strongly and pathetically desired.

Claudia, part-time narrator and childhood companion, points out the moral of Pecola's story: 'All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.'

Perhaps more significant than the catalogue of forms of victimization in the above quotation is the 'we' that makes Pecola the victim. More than the melancholy story of a little girl driven mad by the world's brutality, *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of the community and society that persecutes her. Pecola may be the central character, but she is far from the only victim of the blue eyes. 'We' individually and collectively are both victimizer and victim; and, while the roles vary with each character, it is also the case that the role of victimizer results from that character's own victimization by a larger society. Each person fantasizes that he has real self-determining power. But Claudia, at the end, knows better: 'We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word.'

The pursuit of the Word entraps the characters. Pauline Breedlove differs from her daughter Pecola only in the sense that the image she believes in comes from the movie screen rather than the milk cup. Whiteness is goodness, and she feels more at home in the white kitchen where she works than in the rundown house she shares with her family. In the chapter giving her history, we learn that she has compensated for her lameness and putative ugliness by creating order wherever possible. In most cases the order is a trivial arrangement of objects, but she learns from the movies that a white home is the paragon of order. Her work in such homes makes possible a control in her life that is impossible in her own existence as a poor black woman with a family suffering under the manipulations of that very white world she loves.

She only overcomes the self-hatred implied by such values through the self-righteousness of her religion. To reinforce this goodness she needs the evil of her husband Cholly: 'She was an active church woman, did not drink, smoke, or carouse, defended herself mightily against Cholly, rose above him in every way, and felt she was fulfilling a mother's role conscientiously when she pointed out their father's faults to keep them away from having them, or punished them when they showed any slovenliness, no matter how slight, when she worked twelve to sixteen hours a day to support them. And the world itself agreed with her.'

Cholly inverts Pauline's values. He deals with self-hatred and oppression by becoming as evil as possible, even to the point of raping his daughter and burning his own house. Behind this 'bad-nigger' persona lies a history of distortions of the principal relationships and rituals of life. He is abandoned in a junkyard by his mother, who was never certain of the identity of the father. His first sexual encounter is interrupted by white men whose derisive comments render him impotent. His search for the man he believes to be his father ends at a dark alley dice game when the man chases him away, believing he has come only for money. Such events make him both anti- and asocial. He hates the girl of his sexual humiliation rather than the white men because she was a witness to his powerlessness; he has no sense of socially acceptable behavior because he has been denied primary socialization; and he is incapable of appropriate fatherly behavior because he has had no parents. The most perverse act of his life, the rape of Pecola, is a product of his confusion of violence and love....

The various ways in which society has conditioned Cholly so as to control him have had the effect of denying him a socially acceptable means of expressing an authentic human emotion. Having learned that he is nothing but an object of disgust, he, like Pauline, can do nothing other than objectify Pecola. Each of them exploits her because his own exploitation makes it impossible to do otherwise. In the larger community, objectification is also common. White storekeepers, light-skinned children, and black middle-class adults all see this black child as a piece of filth repugnant yet necessary to their own sense of cleanliness. Alternatives to the pattern of victimization can be found in two sets of characters, the whores and the McTeer family. Though diametrically opposed in both values and ambitions, both groups offer ways of coping with the pain of experience. The whores accomplish this by being what they are.... They are women who do their work without illusion, self-hatred, or guilt. They have no use for their customers or for those dishonest women who pretend virtue but are in fact unfaithful. They respect only the innocents, like Pecola, and truly religious women who they see as having the same honesty and integrity as themselves.

They are also the primary folk figures in the novel. Even their names—Poland, China, Maginot Line—suggest larger-than-life characters. Maginot Line entertains Pecola with outlandish stories of past loves and adventures. She keeps alive the idea of love in her recollections of Dewey Prince, the only man she did not sell herself to. China is adept at verbal dueling, constantly drawing Maginot Line back from the edge of sentimentality with sarcasm. Poland is 'forever ironing, forever singing.' Her songs are blues, which serve less to express personal problems than to entertain through reminders of the nature of the world in which they live. These folk arts enable them to transcend the private obsessions of other characters. The world may well be a place of misery and doom, but folk wisdom dictates that one adapts to circumstances rather than resignedly move toward evasion or self-destruction. Blues and folk tales imply that trouble is both personal and communal and that life is a matter of adaptation and survival rather than resignation and death. The whores treat themselves and Pecola with consideration because they neither despair nor hope.

Ironically, the McTeer family, although hostile to the behavior and attitude of the whores, make a decent life for themselves by working from the same principles. One of the functions of the family in the novel is to serve as a counterpoint for the Breedloves. Pauline slaps Pecola and protects a little white girl, whereas Mrs. McTeer takes in the black girl, even though it is a strain on her family's resources. Cholly rapes his own daughter, whereas Mr. McTeer nearly kills a boarder who fondles his daughter. The Breedloves are so absorbed in variations of self-hatred that they see each other only as objects, whereas the McTeers make themselves into a family despite all the economic, psychological, and social forces opposing them.

This is not to suggest that the McTeers are sentimentalized into the Dick-and-Jane family of the school reader. Morrison insists that it is in fact those who refuse such sentimentality who are the most heroic. The McTeers live without illusion as much as possible. The parents whip their children, complain about the burdens of life, and struggle only semi-successfully to acquire the necessities for survival. The children must face embarrassment because of their cheap clothing and lack of money and must deal with the same assaults on their race as Pecola. But unlike the Breedloves and the light-skinned Geraldine and Maureen, they do not measure their human worth by the symbols of the dominant white culture. Although the Shirley Temple cup belongs to the McTeers and although Frieda, Claudia's sister, loves the child actress's movies, no one in the family defines himself or herself by a lack of whiteness. They accept their difference from whites as a given of their existence, not as a deprivation to be evaded or mourned.

Claudia, the narrator, is the most emphatic in asserting this difference. She serves for a while as a rebel figure, similar to the young Jane Pittman in Ernest Gaines's novel. She plots insults and attacks on Maureen Peel, who glories in her lack of melanin. More important, she almost ritualistically destroys the white doll she receives for Christmas.... The doll is an emblem of a manipulative, inverted order. Adults and children are encouraged to believe that this combination of wood, cloth, and metal is an idealization of girlhood and that the noise it makes is a human cry. Claudia herself confuses illusion and reality when she does violence to real white girls who seem to her imitations of the doll. Claudia's instinct to penetrate to the secret of the doll's voice and demystify it is appropriate, but her identification of objects and human beings is a measure of her acceptance of the culture's dehumanization. Even if the white girls take their identity from the doll, as its deliberate design and mechanism implies that they should, even if, in other words, they take the object as more real than themselves, their voices nonetheless remain human voices and their pain human pain. Claudia ultimately fails, not because of her confusion, which she overcomes, but because she refuses to live in her demystified knowledge.

The state of rebellion cannot be sustained because it requires a perpetual opposition and negation without hope of victory. *The Bluest Eye*, then, is about the difficulty of achieving individuality and full humanity in an objectifying and manipulative society. To refuse that state of tension and negation is to accept self-hatred, illusion, and even madness. In this novel, the best that can be accomplished is an intimation of what a fully human condition might be."

Keith E. Byerman
"Beyond Realism: The Fictions of Toni Morrison"
*Fingering the Jagged Grain:
Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction*
(U Georgia 1985) 184-216

"The sequence of events in this story—a sequence of rape, madness, and silence—repeats a sequence I have read before. Originally manifest in mythic accounts of Philomela and Persephone, this sequence provides Morrison with an ancient archetype from which to structure her very contemporary account of a young black woman.... For an account of Philomela, we must turn to Ovid, who includes her story in his *Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.). According to the chronicler, this story begins with an act of separation. Procne leaves her much-loved sister, Philomela, to join her husband, Tereus, in Thrace... Individual mythemes from Philomela's story appear, without distortion in that of Pecola. First, in various ways and at various costs, the female figure suffers violation....

Claudia's description of the mutilated Pecola leaves no doubt that she no longer exists as a reasonable human being; like Philomela-turned-nightingale, the 'little-girl-gone-to-woman' undergoes transformation:

'The damage was total'.... While clearly related to the Philomela myth, that of Persephone differs in certain details which, when brought to *The Bluest Eye*, prompts an even richer reading of the novel.... The mythic situation itself, flower picking, finds an analog in the novel as Pecola, on her way to the candy store, peers into the heads of yellow dandelions. Second, [Sir James] Frazer's more detailed description of Persephone's abduction and underworld residence [in *The Golden Bough*] might serve as metaphoric description of Pecola's state of mind following her rape....

Structurally, the stories of Philomela, Persephone, and Pecola share the same blueprint: violated by a male relative, a young virgin suffers sensual loss of such an extreme that her very identity is called into question.... Morrison's novel contains repeated instances of Pecola's negation as other characters refuse to see her [echo of Ellison's *Invisible Man*]. *The Bluest Eye* also provides numerous instances of Pecola's desire to hide her own eyes, thereby refusing to acknowledge certain aspects of her world.... Quivering and shaking, Pecola *does* maintain a hold on her world and herself—until Cholly smashes her illusions about the possibility of unambivalent love in this world. Throughout the novel, Pecola ponders the nature of love, pursues it as a potentially miraculous phenomenon....

Pecola falls back on an early notion: the world changes as the eyes which see it change. To effect this recreation, Pecola seeks out the only magician she knows, Soaphead Church, and presents him with the only plan she can conceive. She asks that he make her eyes different, make them blue—blue because in Pecola's experience only those with blue eyes receive love: Shirley Temple, Geraldine's cat, the Fisher girl.... Of course, the script for this show sends Pecola into realms of madness.

Even Soaphead acknowledges that 'No one else will see her blue eyes,' but Soaphead justifies himself first on the grounds that 'she will love happily ever after' and then, more honestly... Soaphead's creation of false belief is not necessarily right for Pecola, but for himself. Morrison substantiates this assessment of Soaphead's creation a few pages later, when she portrays its effect on Pecola. Imprisoned now behind blue eyes, the schizophrenic little girl can talk only to herself. Obviously, this instance of male-female interaction parallels earlier scenes from the novel: 'rape' occurs as Soaphead elevates himself at the expense of Pecola....

Although the stories of Philomela, Persephone, and Pecola do not form a composite whole, each of them, with its varied and individual emphases, contributes to a much larger woman's myth, which tells of denial and disintegration, which unveils the oft-concealed connections between male reason, speech, presence and female madness, silence, absence. As a young black woman, Pecola assumes an especially poignant position in this growing complex of mythic representations; she is absent (and absented) in relation to the norms of male culture and in relation to the norms of white culture. Ultimately, I read Pecola's story as a tragic version of the myth; this twentieth-century black woman remains behind blue eyes, an inarticulate, arm-fluttering bird. But I cannot read *The Bluest Eye* as tragedy...although the novel documents the sacrifice of one black woman, it attests to the survival of two others—a survival akin to that of Philomela or Persephone—filled with hardship, but also with hope."

Madonne M. Miner

"Lady No Longer Sings the Blues: Rape, Madness, and Silence in *The Bluest Eye*"

Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition

ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers

(Indiana U 1985) 176-91

"*The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's study of a community out of touch with the land and the history that might have saved them. The displacement of blacks had begun long before Claudia's retrospective narration about the failed marigolds. The distance between their lives and the ideal American home or family, depicted in the passage from the grade-school reader that opens the novel, is also measured by the increasingly distorted passage, parts of which later introduce the subject of each subsequent chapter. This technique reveals the pervasive trauma of dislocation suffered by Pecola, Claudia, Soaphead Church, and the entire community.... The victim here is not only Pecola's premature and dead baby, sired by Pecola's own father, but also Pecola herself. The loss of Claudia's and Frieda's innocence, as they witness and report Pecola's decline, makes them victims as well....

Pecola's deteriorating emotional balance and the trouble witnessed by Frieda and Claudia that forces their early maturation appear first in a gradual compression of print in the passage until the words jumble together. The distortion represents the girls' actual education. The syntactical and typographical disorder reveals the increasing violation of physical, social, and personal space....

Pecola's rape neither begins nor completes her disintegration. That deed is left to Soaphead Church, another figure alienated from the land.... He grants Pecola's wish for blue eyes. His appearance and act in the novel...are more diabolical than Cholly's deed, which at least offered Pecola a kind of love and recognition, however perverted. Soaphead offers insanity. Both men keep Pecola grounded—if not pinned bodily—to the kitchen floor until she loses consciousness or becomes mired in schizophrenia and delusion. Both family and community, loved ones and landscape, have banished Pecola. A devastating inertia prevents her from achieving the flight she thought would come with the blue eyes. Pecola wears a vision of the sky (like Cholly's search for transcendent, cohering music) but fails to achieve its reward of flight: 'The damage done was total'....

As Pecola scavenges through garbage, her birdlike gestures diminish 'to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world,' and Claudia realizes the extent to which Pecola had absorbed the waste she and others had dumped on her. In return Pecola simply gave the only beauty she had: her innocence. Claudia, now mature, realizes that the failure of marigold seeds to grow that year was not only the fault of 'the earth, the land, of our town,' but hers as well. Having acquiesced to the easy victimization of Pecola, Claudia had failed to acknowledge the earth's own will to kill and the readiness of humans to accomplish the deed."

Melvin Dixon

"Like an Eagle in the Air: Toni Morrison"

Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature
(U Illinois 1987) 141-69

"*The Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks yet on the relationship between Western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women. But Pecola Breedlove's predicament, as the young black girl who feels that blackness condemns her to ugliness and lovelessness, is not only a problem for black girls and women. Morrison makes this clear in an expose of the 'ugliness' of black poverty, powerlessness, and loss of positive self-concept in this poignant, haunting, poetic narrative. *The Bluest Eye* was not an instant literary success, and it was out of print by 1974. Its reincarnation, however, has been triumphant. Initially, it had few black reviewers, although its notices appeared in important organs, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New Yorker*, *Newsweek*, *Black World*, *CLA Journal*, and *Freedomways* among them, and it brought Toni Morrison to public notice. In its wake, her name appeared frequently in magazine articles in which she commented on black life and women's issues, and...in one year she wrote twenty-eight reviews for the *New York Times*."

Nellie Y. McKay, ed.

Critical Essays on Toni Morrison
(G. K. Hall 1988) 3-4

"In *The Bluest Eye*, the fact of Pecola's baby and its origin is simply and quickly told in one page near the beginning of the novel. 'There is really nothing more to say—except why,' states the narrative voice at the end of this passage. 'But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.' Much of the novel is a retrospective justified by the question 'How' and the implied query 'Why' Cholly Breedlove would impregnate Pecola, his daughter. Told through the voices and perspectives of children much of the time, the story moves forward until it is 'interrupted' by two short chapters that reveal the personal histories of Pecola's mother and father, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove. With Morrison's swift narrative strokes, the chapter on Cholly climaxes with his rape of Pecola—the various details of his troubled life and soured relationship with Pauline shrouding from him the real nature of his horrible act."

Margaret B. Wilkerson

"The Dramatic Voice in Toni Morrison's Novels"
Critical Essays (1988) 184

“The chapter which introduces the Breedlove family to the reader is prefaced by the primer’s reference to Jane’s ‘very happy’ family... But the family presented in the subsequent pages of the novel is the very antithesis of the standardized, ideal (white) American family of the primer. The reader learns, in fact, of the Breedloves’ utter failure to conform to the standards by which the beauty and happiness of the primer family (and, by extension, American families in general) are measured.... In her systematic figuration of an inversive relationship between pretext (the primer) and text (her delineation of Afro-American life), the author dissects, *deconstructs*, if you will, the bourgeois myths of ideal family life.... [This white family] appears to be made up of rigid, emotionless figures incapable of deep feeling.... Her manipulation of the primer is meant to suggest, finally, the inappropriateness of the white voice’s attempt to authorize or authenticate the black text or to dictate the contours of Afro-American art. *The Bluest Eye*’s first-person narrator, Claudia, performs a similar act in rejecting white criteria of judgment when she is able to view her childhood... Claudia discovers that despite the difficulties of poverty in an opulent America, ‘all the while I was quite happy’....

Claudia’s somewhat sadistic dismemberment of white dolls and her subsequent torture of white girls are meant to recall, it seems to me, Bigger Thomas’s axed mutilation of the dead body of Mary Dalton (presented by Wright as a symbol of young white female beauty) in *Native Son*.... Claudia’s ‘conversion’ is motivated not by an embrace of humanity, but rather by ‘shame’...that her failure to accept without question the standards of white America is considered ‘repulsive.’ Claudia terminates her search for the source of white myths of superiority and replaces the violent urges she had previously directed at whites with ‘fraudulent love’....

[Morrison’s] provocative revision of Ellison suggests most clearly her view that energetic rejection of male (mis)representations of women is necessary for a faithful and responsible depiction of women’s lives. I believe that at the heart of *The Bluest Eye*’s delineation of an incestuous encounter between Pecola and her father is Morrison’s intertextually charged revision of the Ellisonian depiction of incest in the Trueblood episode of *Invisible Man*.... [In] Morrison’s purposefully feminist revision of Ellison...*The Bluest Eye* provides...an example par excellence of...‘revisionary reading [that] open[s] new avenues for comprehending male texts’.”

Michael Awkward
“Roadblocks and Relatives: Critical Revision in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*”
Critical Essays (1988) 57-66

“The setting mirror perhaps one of the greatest beliefs in black communities during and after slavery—that the North is a freer place for black people economically and socially. It does not matter that Lorain, Ohio, is just a shade north of south... When Pauline loses a tooth and gives up trying to imitate white movie heroines, she resigns herself to poverty and ugliness. When her children are born, she conditions them to see the North as the nightmare into which her dream has turned. In short, her trading of myth for reality becomes detrimental to her whole family... Once she loses faith in the possibility for change she gives up beliefs that have tied her to historical black communities... Giving up reflects, in part, her ultimate transference of identification from blacks to whites, as illustrated in her worship of the ‘little pink-and-yellow’ Fisher girl. Her severing of ties to the folk culture in turn short circuits any connections she could pass on to Pecola that would aid her in reconnecting to that culture....

Morrison offers a part of the pattern of black interaction that sustains against the dissolution represented by Pauline’s refusal to mother her children, Geraldine’s distortion of the notion of family, and Cholly’s destructive abuse of his daughter. The emphasis upon caring applies to the cures offered Aunt Jimmy during her illness. While they do not save her, they illustrate a variety of beliefs and convey the altruistic concern absent from many relationships in the novel.... Their belief in and the very description of M’Dear is also reminiscent of historical folk communities where local healers, or conjurers, or hoodoo doctors usually had distinctive physical characteristics or deformities that set them apart from others in the community.... M’Dear’s place in the community is secure, or more so, than the preacher’s; her practical status as midwife lends credence to, if not actual tolerance for, her other areas of expertise. Her ties to the community, despite her seeming outsider status, provide another contrast to Pecola, who, severed from those traditions that could incorporate her, merely remains outside the bonds of caring....

Metaphors comparable to those Zora Neale Hurston uses in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) occur intermittently, making contrasts between the characters like Geraldine, who deny any ties to folk roots, and those who are closer to the selves inherent in their blackness, such as Claudia's mother.... Nicknaming is an old and venerated tradition in the black community, and not having been given one, Pauline felt excluded.... Pecola becomes the victim who invites further abuse because she suffers visibly.... Pecola will never be an insider in the black community and cannot possibly hope for acceptance beyond it. All combine to reinforce Pecola's belief that the only escape for her is to become beautiful through obtaining the bluest eyes of all, ones that will dazzle everyone into loving her....

Pauline and Cholly Breedlove have both come into contact with forms of Afro-American culture used to tie black people to each other in caring, sharing ways. Yet their move to the North parallels a dissolution in their abilities to use the forms to which they have been exposed for any sustaining purposes. Thus they break the chains of continuity in culture and can only produce children who are outside that which had the potential to nurture them. Pecola and Cholly must therefore exist in a world of fragmentation, in a world where Mrs. MacTear and Poland might show signs of the more sustaining Southern black culture, but which they cannot effectively transmit to the Breedlove children. They, like other characters in their isolated existences in the novel, are tied together by cultural forces stronger than all of them, but the strands of that cultural net keep breaking away from Pecola to slip her back into a sea of confusion about herself and about her place in the world of Lorain, Ohio."

Trudier Harris

"Reconnecting Fragments: Afro-American Folk Tradition in *The Bluest Eye*"
Critical Essays (1988) 68-72, 75-76

"The countertextual dynamic of the novel begins with the quotation from the Dick and Jane primer, an introductory gesture, which is in fact and by implication not unlike the prefatory essay to Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, 'The Ethics of Living Jim Crow' (1938) in that it introduces what is to follow, offers evidence to comment upon and supports the thematic implications of the main text, and at the same time informs the main text at each point along its course, its implications engraved within every aspect of plot, character, and description....

Yet a paradox arises when we consider that Morrison organizes her text around the primer passage. The sections focusing on Pecola and her family are headed by a line or two from the primer text, the text standing in countertextual relation to the actuality of Pecola's and her family's lives. The final chapter of the novel opens with the primer lines 'Look, look. Here comes a friend,' and we of course recall that Piccolo's friend is hallucinated, the product of her madness. But she does, after all, as the countertext has it, have her blue eyes."

Donald B. Gibson

"Text and Countertext in *The Bluest Eye*"
Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present (1993)
eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah

"Ostensibly, Pecola is driven mad by her inability to possess blue eyes. But her insanity really results from the fact that she serves as the communal scapegoat, bearing not only her own self-loathing, but that of her neighbors and family as well. Soaphead Church's failure to provide her with blue eyes is thus simply the proverbial back-breaking straw.... *The Bluest Eye* does not address the hard questions directly. The book does not undertake to explain, for example, why black Americans aspire to an unattainable standard of beauty; why they displace their self-hatred onto a communal scapegoat; how Pecola's fate might have been averted.... Claudia accepts as a given that certain 'soils' will reject both marigolds and plain black girls.... The chapters counterpoint three moments in time: a past before the narrative present (the flashbacks), the eternal present of the primer, and the narrative present of Pecola's story as told by Claudia. The different narratives in each chapter provide variations on a specific theme. This technique demonstrates here and throughout Morrison's fiction the interconnectedness of past and present."

Valerie Smith

"*Song of Solomon: Continuities of Community*"
Critical Perspectives (1993) 273-74

“In *The Bluest Eye*, the portrait of family life described in the ‘Dick and Jane’ frame is a childish oversimplification [written for children learning how to read], not only of language but of reality.... The traditional association with the idea of home become, in *The Bluest Eye* ironic comments on both the inaccuracy and the insufficiency of the stereotype. The image of the happy (white) family at home is inverted in the radical homelessness of Pecola Breedlove and her destitute family. Even the images of the cat and dog reappear in inverted forms, as Pecola is exploited by male members of her own community in the torment or death of other people’s pets: for ‘Junior,’ his mother’s adored (blue-eyed) cat; for Soaphead Church, his landlady’s aged dog....

Such are the ‘good colored girls’ who repress their anger, practice submission, attend college at land-grant institutions, and ‘learn how to do the white man’s work with refinement.’ Conforming to white culture’s expectations of them, they become dismembered like Claudia’s decapitated white dolls, asexual and stripped of selfhood. Females like Pecola Breedlove, who fall outside the boundaries of even such marginal and self-denying acceptability, are thus radically threatening to ‘proper black girls’.... Pauline Breedlove, disillusioned by her family life, retreats into a dream world purveyed by cinematic imagemakers of white cultural fantasies. Thus she is enslaved, not in the literal sense, but symbolically, by what are to Morrison ‘probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought’: romantic love and physical beauty.... [natural biological selection is worse than racism?]

The emotional crippling shared by Cholly and Pauline is indeed bred into the next generation.... [Pecola] is the dark shadow, the Other, that undermines both white and black fantasies of female goodness, beauty, and upward mobility. Her position at the bottom of the bottom symbolizes the regrettable need to pronounce someone inferior in order to defend a fragile sense of self-worth. When the child Pecola hears her parents fighting on the other side of the partition in their makeshift ‘home,’ she virtually wishes herself into invisibility: ‘Please, God.... Please make me disappear’.... Pecola’s desire to be perceived as a human being in order to exist at all is concentrated in her sad fantasy of obtaining blue eyes.... She exists only in the image reflected by others—by other eyes’ I’s. Existentially, she is an object, never a subject....

Pecola is literally a stranger to her mother, addressing her as ‘Mrs. Breedlove.’ When she goes to the house where her mother is a domestic and nanny for a white female child, Pauline denies even knowing who Pecola is. The cruelty of the scene repeats Pauline’s initial rejection of Pecola at birth and accentuates the circular negation of selfhood: the mother becomes a fearful child before the greater power of her young white ‘mistress’; her own daughter experiences that fear as her mother’s preference for her white ‘daughter,’ who is privileged to call Mrs. Breedlove by the familiar name, Polly, in marked contrast to Pecola’s formal address.... Thus, Pecola Breedlove’s division into two ‘selves’ at the end of *The Bluest Eye* represents her inability to see herself as a whole person or, in fact, as a person at all. Soaphead Church’s deception (a product of his own self-deception) destroys her last connection to being. Her desire for the most basic confirmation of self in the eyes of others drives her mad, as she splits into the girl with blue eyes and the one ‘friend’ who can corroborate the miracle.”

Roberta Rubenstein
“Pariahs and Community”
Critical Perspectives (1993) 127-32, 136

“For Polly Breedlove, alienation is the inability to experience pleasure ever again—orgasm or otherwise—whereas for the ‘sugar-brown Mobile girls,’ whose husbands are more successful and therefore better assimilated into bourgeois society, alienation is the purposeful denial of pleasure. Once again Morrison translates the loss of history and culture into sexual terms and demonstrates the connection between bourgeois society and repression.... At a sexual level, alienation is the denial of the body, produced when sensuality is redefined as indecent. Sounds and tactile sensations that might otherwise have precipitated or highlighted pleasure provoke annoyance or disdain.... To break through repressed female sexuality, Morrison contrasts images of stifled womanhood with girlhood sensuality....

The ultimate horror of bourgeois society against which Morrison writes and the end result of both alienation and repression is reification.... Reification, although never attained by any of Morrison’s characters—not even those drawn from the white world—is, instead, embodied in a number of figural images from *The Bluest Eye*. These are celluloid images of Shirley Temple or her ‘cute’ face on a blue-

and-white china cup, and the candy-wrapper images of Mary Jane. Most of all, reification is evident in the plastic smile and moronic blue eyes of a white Christmas baby doll. When Claudia destroys these—dismembering the doll and poking its eyes out—her rebellion is not just aimed at the idea of beauty incarnated in a white model. She is also striking out against the horrifying dehumanization that acceptance of the model implies—both for the black who wears it as a mask and for the white who creates commodified images of the self. [Are all dolls evil?]

Susan Willis
“Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison”
Critical Perspectives (1993) 310, 312

“These three elements—the Dick and Jane primer backdrop, the modulated voice of Claudia, and the constant continuum between the mean, precious seasons and the growth of young black girls—are the fuse from which this story of a mutilated life bursts into sparks.... The Dick and Jane primer reminds us of the pervasiveness of the happy family, middle-American romantic beauty myth so we are not tempted to see its effects on Pecola’s life as unique or idiosyncratic. The primer confronts the grossness of standardized bland concepts projected as desirable, the norm. Where do Dick and Jane exist? Probably only on the pages of that primer.... The solidity of the MacTeer family is the image, the real image, of a struggling family from a young girl’s point of view in contrast to the empty Dick and Jane ideal....

A voice intrudes, as the Dick and Jane prose recedes, a voice that will recur throughout the book. It is the voice of Claudia MacTeer as she speaks for herself and her sister when they were children. Her voice speaking to us gives the reader a personal feeling for this story, for Claudia takes us into her memories, personal experiences, girlish desires and fears, as she and her sister try to make sense of the often confusing world around them.... In her introductory statement, and in the section that begins each chapter, she establishes the time, place, image, and structure of the novel as well as introduces the major characters of the book. She then becomes our central narrator....

The main body of *The Bluest Eye* is divided into four chapters named for the seasons, a schema we are prepared for by Claudia’s introductory statement in which she relates the failure of the marigolds to sprout with the death of Pecola’s baby. ‘The seeds shriveled and died, her baby too.’ Nature images are constant throughout the book and help to organize its structure. At the center of this nature construct are the physical and psychological events that lead to the rape of Pecola and to her ill-fated pregnancy. The divisions into seasons beginning with autumn chart that development of events. These events, in fact, form the plot of the novel.... Each chapter, like ‘Spring,’ has a unifying sound idea, recurrent images, translucent connectives, as each section explores in depth a variation of the them played throughout. But not only is the structure of the book circular, it is also elliptical, for not only is each chapter of the book itself coherent, it is also linked to every other. Morrison’s transitions are in the form of her characters. The focal character may be Pecola, but all of the other characters in varying degrees suffer from the insanity that will manifest itself in her madness. The story moves, connects piece by piece, through the presentation of one character after another who shows us some aspect of that insanity....

As if she were a musician, Morrison connects Pecola Breedlove’s desire for the bluest eyes to Mrs. Breedlove’s restricted spirit and Cholly Breedlove’s sense of unworthiness, to Geraldine’s fear of funk and Soaphead Church’s sterility, to Maureen’s fate as an eternal dream child and Claudia’s ache to be whole. By exploring the devastating effects that the Western ideas of beauty and romantic love have on a vulnerable black girl, this novelist also demonstrates how these ideas can invert the natural order of an entire culture. The vortex, at which two conflicting orders meet, Pecola becomes the scapegoat for that part in all of us that needs to see our own fears of unworthiness embodied in some form. As black and female, Morrison concludes, the Pecolas of America are an accessible dumping ground.”

Barbara Christian
“The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison”
Critical Perspectives (1993) 61-64, 71, 73-74

“The body of *The Bluest Eye* represents an intentional inversion of the primer. Morrison’s further manipulation of the primer are, indeed, even more striking. She employs the primer not only as prefatory material to the text proper, but also to introduce the chapters of *The Bluest Eye* that are recounted by the

novel's omniscient narrative voice. The seven epigraphic sections are...thematically tied to the chapters which they directly precede.... In her systematic analysis...the author dissects, *deconstructs*, if you will, the bourgeois myths of ideal family life. Through her deconstruction, she exposes each individual element of the myth as not only deceptively inaccurate in general, but also wholly inapplicable to Afro-American life. The emotional estrangement of the primer family members (an estrangement suggested by that family's inability to respond to the daughter Jane's desire for play) implies that theirs is solely a surface contentment. For despite [critic] Hedin's suggestion that this family is represented as 'healthy' and 'supportive,' it appears to be made up of rigid, emotionless figures incapable of deep feeling.... [Perhaps this is because the primer was written for little children to teach them how to read.]

Morrison attempts to break the spell of the hypnotic propaganda of an overly materialistic America. She seeks, by means of her deconstruction, to mitigate the power of (American propagandistic) words and to make possible an emotion-privileged Afro-American environment. In her attempt to alter the reader's perception of what should be viewed as normative and healthy, Morrison's perspective is similar to that of her character Claudia when she discusses what would be for her an ideal Christmas... By privileging feelings and experience over ownership of objects, Claudia—and Morrison—rejects bourgeois standards of happiness.... Her manipulation of the primer is meant to suggest, finally, the inappropriateness of the white voice's attempt to authorize or authenticate the Afro-American text or to dictate the contours of Afro-American art. Morrison's attitudes differ significantly from those of Ralph Ellison. For unlike Ellison, Morrison appears to have little interest in comparisons of her work to that of white authors, and views such comparisons as 'offensive' and 'irrelevant'....

Claudia's somewhat sadistic dismemberment of white dolls and her subsequent torture of white girls is meant to recall, it seems to me, Bigger Thomas' axed mutilation of the dead body of Mary Dalton (presented by Richard Wright as a symbol of young white female beauty) in *Native Son*....The community's worship at the altar of white beauty is only gesture, only acts 'smoothly cultivated' to fool the master, to appease the gods. Because Pecola never learns of the potential benefits of masking and self-division in a white-dominated America, she represents a perfect target of scorn for the blacks who are armed with this knowledge. These Afro-Americans, in fact, use Pecola as ritual object in their ceremonies designed to exhibit to the master their 'rejection' of blackness....

The projection of the shadow, and its resultant scapegoating, then, can lead to the sacrifice of the black offspring, to parental detachment from the child, and to complete adoption of white standards as suggested by the 'whispered...honey in [the] words' of Polly to the Fisher girl. Such projection can also be, as in the example of Geraldine, a futile effort to erase the black self entirely. Geraldine desires to repress and deny 'the funk,' to exhibit no characteristically or stereotypically Afro-American qualities such as thick lips, nappy edges, and 'rounded enunciation'....[like Jadine in *Tar Baby*] Pecola is everything that Geraldine is fighting to suppress. She is, for Geraldine, 'funk,' shadow, the blackness of blackness.... [In] Morrison's depiction of incest... I believe that Morrison is consciously (and *critically*) revising the Ellisonian depiction of incest in the Trueblood episode of *Invisible Man*....

Her characters' projections of the shadow of blackness, their unquestioning acceptance of American standards of beauty and morality, suggest that they have, indeed, bleached their souls 'in a flood of white Americanism.' Theirs are not merged, but hopelessly divided selves, selves which attempt an erasure of blackness. In her exploration of divided and funk-rejected characters, Morrison both revises Du Bois and seems to refigure instances from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.... The Breedloves' name...is bestowed with bitter irony; theirs is a self-hating family in which no love is bred....

Pecola's splitting into two voices corresponds directly to the two-voiced narration of *The Bluest Eye*. The text of Morrison's novel has been narrated by two distinct voices: by Claudia and by an omniscient presence. For the greater part of the novel, these voices are in their focus and levels of emotional involvement...distinct from one another... But after the onset of Pecola's schizophrenic double voicedness, the distinctive narrative voices of *The Bluest Eye* apparently merge into a single voice.... Not only, then, does Claudia's voice occupy the position previously reserved for the omniscient narrator, it also evidences a scope and breadth of knowledge that had heretofore belonged only to that omniscient voice.... The sacrifice of Pecola—a young girl who measures her own worth in terms of idealized white standards of

beauty and morality, and goes mad as a result—is, it would appear, necessary for the achievement of the Afro-American expressive ideal of merged consciousness, of unified voice.”

Michael Awkward

“‘The Evil of Fulfillment’: Scapegoating and Narration in *The Bluest Eye*”
Critical Perspectives (1993), 178-80, 186, 189, 193-95, 206-07

“In *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, published in 1970, Morrison begins her familial interrogations with one of the most deeply suppressed and unsayable issues in familial representation, father-daughter rape and incest, but here she is clearly more interested in the daughter’s story than in the father’s. Although her portrayals of Cholly Breedlove is remarkably gentle and even sympathetic, Morrison focuses less on him than on Pecola herself, on *her* dreams, desires, and disappointments. Cholly’s devastating role is to act out more directly the humiliation that society already inflicted on Pecola.”

Marianne Hirsch

“Knowing Their Names: Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*”
New Essays on Song of Solomon, ed. Valerie Smith
(Cambridge U 1995) 72

“The book focuses incessantly on the ‘ugliness’ of Pecola Breedlove, an ugliness fostered by a society that values blond hair and blue eyes as standards of beauty. *The Bluest Eye* can be unsettling because it traces the racial identity American society has erased for many of our students. It can also crystallize some of the conflicts students of color consciously or unconsciously have felt in developing a sense of identity: To make the book speak to all students no matter what their ethnic or racial backgrounds, it should be treated as a text that scrutinizes the complex dynamics of identity formation that involve everyone. In addition to race, the novel takes as a primary issue the position of women within marginalized cultures.... Though Morrison wrote the novel in the wake of the civil rights movement, she had a difficult time finding a publisher for it....

The Bluest Eye illustrates some potentially destructive practices that can go into identity formation. While the novel suggests that Claudia McTeer has survived the traumas of growing up black in America, it is not wholly affirmative or celebratory. *The Bluest Eye* looks critically at both a dominant Euro-American society and an African American community complicitous in its own oppression.... *The Bluest Eye* examines the harmfulness of taking one type of identity as a universal standard.... But the novel cannot be taught as a representative portrait of the black experience in America either.... The issue of mimesis [Realism], which much avant-garde theory considers passe, cannot be dismissed as old-fashioned when it comes to the representation of experiences marginalized by or erased from the national consciousness....

An early scene in the novel is emblematic of these issues: the adoration of the Shirley Temple cup. The primary narrator, the adult Claudia, recounts how Frieda and Pecola adulate the figure of pristine white beauty: ‘I couldn’t join in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me.’ The dispossession and exclusion, Claudia finds, turn to violence against pretty white dolls given to her at Christmas... Gradually, the violence against white dolls becomes violence against white children....

The madness...manifests itself in varying degrees among the characters who most closely associate white with a natural state. Cholly feels that association in his need and failure to express his sexuality lovingly as a form of affirmation; he is denied this expression by his humiliation before the eyes of white men as a youth. Mrs. Breedlove finds order and a sense of self-worth only in the world of her white employers. Her madness manifests itself in her inability to comprehend and address her family’s needs. Pecola, of course, perceives worth and beauty as linked to whiteness and can attain these qualities only in the barren madness of her imaginary world of bluest eyes.”

Rafael Perez-Torres

“Tracing and Erasing: Race and Pedagogy in *The Bluest Eye*”
Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison
eds. Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle
(MLA 1997) 21-26

“As teachers we often assign literature that exposes and seeks to ameliorate injustice, which allows us to crusade from positions of privileged complacency. By depicting insoluble social problems in all their complexity, thereby denying closure, Morrison grimly illustrates the naivete of such grand notions....

A white instructor teaching this explosive book can be effectively paralyzed, especially in a multicultural classroom.... *The Bluest Eye* is not taught as frequently as some of Morrison’s other novels, even though it is short, has been anthologized, and is one of her most accessible works.... The one persistent difficulty I have had with teaching Morrison’s novels has been getting the men to participate as actively as the women, and this is no doubt because they perceive her works, with the exception of *Song of Solomon*, as ‘women’s novels’.... Males typically respond in one of two ways to the rape: either they are appalled and virulently condemnatory, or they are defensive and may even see the scene as an attempt to malign their gender. (The latter is especially likely if feminist issues have informed class discussion considerably and if the course is required.)....

I had also hoped to bring in a Dick and Jane reader because, in all the years I taught *The Bluest Eye*, only a handful of students had known what one was.... As the Dick and Jane device is crucial to an understanding of how white standards are disseminated and assimilated, I had to explain what these readers were and their relevance to the novel and to such scenes as Pecola’s admiration of the Shirley Temple mug and Claudia’s chilling dismemberment of the white baby doll.... (It was virtually impossible to find a Dick and Jane reader; a children’s librarian at the New York Public Library told me the books were considered rare and could not be checked out.... Once students realize...just how ubiquitous and sly the dissemination of monolithic white ideals is...they can make the logical connection back to the Dick and Jane reader.... Unlike Morrison’s other novels, *The Bluest Eye* cannot cleanly be separated historically or geographically from the here and now, because the novel’s principal themes have such currency and Claudia’s ‘voice-over’ reinforces its contemporaneity.

Kathryn Earle
Approaches (1997) 27-33

“We begin by discussing the opening Dick and Jane narrative. Students easily recognize this familiar text as authoritarian and are eager to condemn it as somehow unrealistic.... [In the] South the Bible was used to justify slavery just as the Dick and Jane narrative serves to confirm second-class citizenship....”

Thomas H. Fick and Eva Gold
“Authority, Literacy, and Modernism in *The Bluest Eye*”
Approaches (1997) 57

“According to [Diane] Johnson, since the novels are about black people who victimize one another, they only confirm Morrison’s white audience’s stereotypes about black people. Francis Beale amplifies that statement: ‘In attempting to analyze the situation of the Black woman in America, one crashes abruptly into a solid wall of grave misconceptions, outright distortions of fact, and defensive attitudes on the part of many’.... Surely the novel goes well beyond replicating stereotypes—the black man as rapist (Cholly Breedlove), the black woman as mammy (Pauline Breedlove), or the black family as fragmented....

Even as the text indicates the black man’s part in consigning the poor black girl/woman to her role as the mule of the world, Morrison is careful to prevent a reading in which Pecola’s father is the arch-villain... [She] is able to grasp the way individuals collude in their own victimization by internalizing a dominant culture’s values.... Further, the representation of the united McTeer family balances the afflicted Breedlove family: a supportive, working father; a resistant black woman as mother and culture bearer; and a spirited narrator who resists and eventually writes her way out of subjection....

The Dick and Jane preface and the prologue establish what is certainly the hallmark of Morrison’s writing, which in her own words is ‘the ability to be both print and oral literature,’ that is, to combine the layered quality of metaphoric writing...with the direct appeal of the narrating voice that engages the reader as listener... While Claudia’s first-person narrative lets us see the possibilities of individual and perhaps collective resistance, the omniscient third-person narratives portray subjection. Within them unfold the

several condensed biographies, each opening into a particular history: Pauline's, Cholly's, Soaphead Church's, and Geraldine's.

Even as black men (Cholly and Soaphead) and petit bourgeois black women (light-brown Geraldine) are implicated as Pecola's oppressors, the novel's symmetry of content and structure makes the reader see them all as an extended black family, caught in different kinds and degrees of self-negating identifications. The novel achieves this 'unity' by structuring the narratives after the Dick and Jane primer.... Morrison's thematic and structural use of the Dick and Jane primer activates the various meanings of priming... The reader is meant to see the debilitating effects of priming on black subjects: a consciousness turned against itself...and 'self-hatred' is 'exquisitely learned'....

The primer is replicated with increasing typographical distortion, so that the last text is practically illegible.... The double-spaced first text with its capitalized proper nouns and standard punctuation may be read as the normative 'type' of self-formation in the dominant white culture. The second text, which is single-spaced and which lacks privileging signs of capital letters and meaningful marks of punctuation, attempts to reproduce the first text. The third text reproduces the word order of the first, without spacing, capital letters, questions marks, or stopgaps; in its disorder, however, it still obeys the order of the first. Here, in brief, is an allegory of class formations and of the first text/world's authorizing of third text/world identities. The first text/world has set itself as the norm against which the third text/world is judged....

Morrison weaves a black story corresponding to each motif in the Dick and Jane text so that Dick and Jane's house corresponds to the Breedloves' poor, storefront house, while Pauline and Cholly and their children, Sammy and Pecola, correspond to and contrast with Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane. Ironically, in the place of the pet cat and dog are the black bourgeois characters, Geraldine (who loves her cat to excess) and the West Indian pedophile, Soaphead (who hates his landlady's dog to excess). Formally, the method by which the singular, homogeneous Dick and Jane text organizes multiple, heterogeneous identities attests to the force of an ideology (of the supremacy of 'the bluest eye') through which the dominant culture reproduces its hierarchical power structures. That black subjects consent to reproduction, which leads to psychic violence among them, is also evident from the unintelligible third text. Although Claudia as narrator implies in the preface that she cannot determine why the marigolds did not bloom—'since *why* is difficult to handle'—it is clear that doing so is central to the representation of her truth. The entire novel explores the forces that lead Pecola to desire blue eyes...

Because privileged-class status in America has been historically coded in white terms, the accession of black people to that status is predicated on a disavowal of their race.... As Pecola's story demonstrates, the socially mandated charade of being something one is not (white) and of not being something one is (black) makes one invisible, while the split mentality it requires equals madness...

The presence of Soaphead Church implicates the mimicry of Geraldine, Pauline, and Pecola as part of colonial oppression.... Soaphead Church (as Elihue Micah Whitcomb is called by black folk in Lorain, Ohio)...with 'lightly browned skin'...is a descendant of the Enlightenment... The effect of 'his father's controlled violence' was that Soaphead 'develop[ed]...a hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of disorder and decay'.... He occupies the place of the trained dog in the Dick and Jane text. Servile to white supremacist values, he finds it perfectly understandable that Pecola should want blue eyes, and he feels gratified at being able to 'grant' them to her. Associated with the dog, Soaphead writes a 'biting' letter to God that shows him bound to the master's imperial power; after all, his nationalist rhetoric notwithstanding, it is not change in the social structure that he desires but a small portion of that power....

Cholly is the poor, uneducated black American male doomed to the underclass who thus remains outside the apparatus of education and class privilege. A man of metropolitan learning, the 'lightly browned' Soaphead has much more in common with the 'sugar brown' Geraldine.... Like Soaphead, Geraldine has been thoroughly schooled. Her training, in femininity and docility, opens to her the serving professions useful to the white society she wishes to enter.... There is much greater irony and pathos in Pauline Breedlove's desperate attempts to approximate the white middle-class norm of beauty, distanced as she is from it by her class and race. She ends up negating her daughter while maintaining a social order (the white Fisher household) that recognizes her only as 'the ideal servant.'

While Soaphead and Geraldine fight signs of corporeal decay, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove fight each other and steadily decay; an inner state manifested by rotten teeth—literally for Pauline and metaphorically for Cholly. Sitting in a cinema mimicking Jean Harlow’s hair style, looking at Jean Harlow from a vantage point of assimilation, Pauline erases her identity.... Claudia McTeer, Toni Morrison’s alter ego, in her successful emergence from hegemonic constraints, successfully models [the] idea of creative practice... Through Claudia’s first-person narrative, the consciousness of childhood is given an adult understanding, its utopian energy of uninhibited desire channeled toward political critique.”

Gurleen Grewal

“‘Laundering the Head of Whitewash’: Mimicry and Resistance in *The Bluest Eye*”
Approaches (1997) 118-26

“In 1970, Holt brought out her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, a success that, though long in coming (the manuscript was rejected many times before it was accepted), was quickly followed by Knopf’s publication of *Sula* in 1973. *The Bluest Eye* explores issues of black identity, self-love, and self-hatred in a world in which the violence of race, gender, and class makes it extremely difficult for large numbers of people to find dignity in their lives. At the center of the action, a young black girl believes that what is most beautiful has the power to restore order and balance to the chaos she experiences in her world, but in a futile search for that beauty, the bluest eye, she eventually goes insane. At the time of its publication, most reviewers of this novel were white critics who approached its unsettling plot with caution but heaped praise on Morrison’s fine evocative lyrical prose. However, black women critics like Ruby Dee engaged it both for its artistic qualities and for the ways in which the new writer captured the pain of young black female experience.”

Nellie Y. McKay, Introduction
Toni Morrison’s Beloved: A Casebook
eds. McKay and William L. Andrews
(Oxford 1999) 5

Michael Hollister (2014)