

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

BOOK GROUP

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Considered among America's finest living novelists, Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931. Her mother and father, Ramah and George Wofford, were hard workers who passed down to their daughter a sense of pride and determination. The family respected learning and cherished storytelling and music. The family also valued reading, all the more so because many of their relatives had not had an opportunity for much formal education. The young Toni Morrison read widely, everything from Jane Austen to Dostoevsky.

After graduating from high school, she attended Howard University from 1949 to 1953, preparing herself for a teaching career by studying English and Classics. She also recounts that at Howard she began calling herself Toni, since her classmates had problems with the name Chloe. From 1953-1955, she studied at Cornell University, earning a Master's degree. Her first teaching post was at Texas Southern, although she returned to Howard University for another teaching position. In Washington, DC, she met and married Harold Morrison, an architect from Jamaica. By 1964, however, the marriage had ended and Toni Morrison moved to New York to become an editor at Random House.

It was surprisingly difficult for Morrison to get her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published, despite her contacts in the publishing world. But when it did appear in 1969, the novel received critical and popular acclaim, especially for its representation of the effect of prejudice on the self-image of the characters. Her next two novels, *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977), were nominated for several awards. The latter novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Throughout the 1970s, Morrison continued to work in publishing and helped other writers, especially African-Americans, to find their literary voices. She also edited nonfiction works, and at least once found historical evidence to provide a basis for her own fiction. In 1974, Morrison read about a former slave named Margaret Garner who tried to murder her children rather than allow them to be enslaved. This event from 1850 became the basis for *Beloved* (1987).

By 1985, Morrison left publishing for academia, and by 1989 was a professor at Princeton University. When *Beloved* was published it only cemented her reputation as a major novelist, receiving a Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Morrison won greater honors in the 1990s, however. In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, and was the first African-American and only the eighth woman to win the award. In 1996, The National Book Foundation honored Toni Morrison with a Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Since then, Morrison has continued to publish and teach. With this celebrated body of work, it is little surprise that Morrison has attracted considerable critical interest, with studies of her fiction available both for scholars and general readers. A particularly useful study for the general reader is Wilfrid Samuel's *Toni Morrison* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), which contains a biography, a critical overview of her career, and analyses of her literary works.

## BOOK SUMMARY

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*The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, is the first novel written by Toni Morrison, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature.

It is the story of eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove--a black girl in an America whose love for its blond, blue-eyed children can devastate all others--who prays for her eyes to turn blue: so that she will be beautiful, so that people will look at her, so that her world will be different. This is the story of the nightmare at the heart of her yearning and the tragedy of its fulfillment.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the folds of the garment.” Is divisiveness one result of this upward striving Morrison describes? What are others?

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

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