

## A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussion groups or library programs.

Meet author Toni Morrison, who grew up in Lorain, Ohio.

Select from a range of discussion questions and extension activities to deepen the experience of reading and sharing *The Bluest Eye*.

Discover interviews, websites, and companion books to explore topics and themes in depth.

# The Bluest Eye

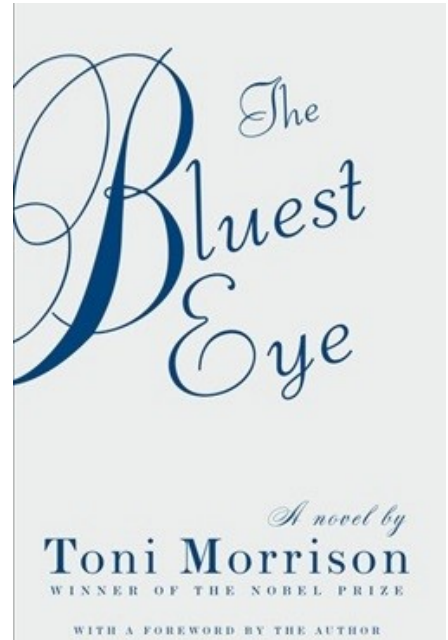
By Toni Morrison



## About the Book

Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl, prays every day for beauty. Mocked by other children for the dark skin, curly hair, and brown eyes that set her apart, she yearns for normalcy, for the blond hair and blue eyes that she believes will allow her to finally fit in. Yet as her dream grows more fervent, her life slowly starts to disintegrate in the face of adversity and strife. A powerful examination of our obsession with beauty and conformity, Toni Morrison's virtuosic first novel asks powerful questions about race, class, and gender with the subtlety and grace that have always characterized her writing.

"So precise, so faithful to speech and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry." —*The New York Times*



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## Book Details

**The Bluest Eye** by Toni Morrison.  
Vintage; Reprint ed., 2007. ISBN 9780307278449. 224 pages.  
[penguinrandomhouse.com/books/117662](http://penguinrandomhouse.com/books/117662)

Available as an ebook and digital audiobook through the Ohio Digital Library:  
[ohiodigitallibrary.com](http://ohiodigitallibrary.com)

Available as a downloadable talking book and Braille book through the State Library of Ohio Talking Book Program:  
[olbpd.klas.com](http://olbpd.klas.com)

Read an appreciation of **The Bluest Eye** on the Ohioana Library blog:  
[www.ohioana.org/toni-morrison-and-the-bluest-eye-50-years-later](http://www.ohioana.org/toni-morrison-and-the-bluest-eye-50-years-later)



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**“Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs — all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured.”**

## About the Author

Toni Morrison is the author of 11 novels, from ***The Bluest Eye*** (1970) to ***God Help the Child*** (2015). She received the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and in 1993 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. A native of Lorain, Ohio, Toni Morrison died in 2019.

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## Author Resources

### Official website of The Toni Morrison Society

[www.tonimorrisonociety.org](http://www.tonimorrisonociety.org)

### Toni Morrison's *New York Times* obituary

[www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/books/toni-morrison-dead.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/books/toni-morrison-dead.html)

### Extensive biography from the Ohio Center for the Book

[ohiocenterforthebook.org/2017/02/14/morrison-toni/](http://ohiocenterforthebook.org/2017/02/14/morrison-toni/)

### NPR Interview with Toni Morrison on Fresh Air (audio, 44 min.):

[www.npr.org/2015/04/20/400394947/i-regret-everything-toni-morrison-looks-back-on-her-personal-life](http://www.npr.org/2015/04/20/400394947/i-regret-everything-toni-morrison-looks-back-on-her-personal-life)

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## Talk About It

Topics to share when discussing ***The Bluest Eye***.

- 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?
- "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?
- 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?

- 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?
  - 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?
  - 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?
  - 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?
  - ***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—within both 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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## Go Further

*Ideas for extending the experience of reading **The Bluest Eye**.*

### Explore

The novel is set in Lorain, Ohio during the 1940s. Explore photographs of Lorain during that time period on the Cleveland Memory Project's website at [www.clevelandmemory.org/lorain/index.html](http://www.clevelandmemory.org/lorain/index.html)

### Visit

Take a day trip to Morrison's birthplace and see her childhood residence at 2245 Elyria Avenue in Lorain. While there, stop by Lakeshore Park, mentioned in the novel, and the Morrison Reading Room at the Lorain Public Library. Round out the excursion by visiting the Carnegie Center and the Moore House Museum.

### Listen

The novel inspired Black Star, a rap duo made up of Mos Def and Talib Kweli, to write the song "Thieves in the Night," which discusses being black in a white world and how to adjust without losing self-identity. Listen to the song by either finding it online or at your local public library. What lines stand out to you most as representing the novel?

**Watch**

*Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*, a film that examines her life, her works and the powerful themes of race, history, America, and the human condition that she has confronted throughout her literary career. You can view the trailer here: [www.tonimorrisonfilm.com/videos](http://www.tonimorrisonfilm.com/videos) and stream or check out the film from your local public library.

**Explore More**

*Additional ideas and resources to use with **The Bluest Eye**.*

**Race Relations During the Great Depression:**

Learn more about race relations in the 1930s and 1940s at the Library of Congress: [www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/race-relations-in-1930s-and-1940s](http://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/race-relations-in-1930s-and-1940s)

**The Doll Study**

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Mamie and Kenneth Clark, a husband-and-wife team of black social psychologists, conducted groundbreaking psychological experiments on black children using dolls. The results, which showed that the majority of black children preferred white dolls to black dolls, were later used in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that overturned the legal doctrine of "separate but equal." Search for more information about the Clarks and their research using the Ohio Web Library: [ohioweblibrary.org/sources](http://ohioweblibrary.org/sources).

**White Beauty Standards/Culture**

Pecola believes her life would be different if she had blue eyes. Beauty standards in the United States and throughout the world tend to emphasize whiteness. How are these standards, and the culture of beauty they create, harmful to society?

Listen to NPR's Code Switch episode "Is Beauty In The Eyes Of The Colonizer?" at: [www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/02/06/685506578](http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/02/06/685506578)

**Internalized Racism**

Internalized racism is the personal conscious or subconscious acceptance of the dominant society's racist views, stereotypes and biases of one's ethnic group. It gives rise to patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that result in discriminating against, minimizing, criticizing, finding fault with, invalidating, and hating oneself while simultaneously valuing the dominant culture.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture's Talking About Race site has a wealth of information on racism and being antiracist: [nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist](http://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist)

**The Great Migration:**

From about 1915-1970, millions of African Americans moved from southern, primarily rural areas of the U.S. to urban areas in the north and west. Search for pictures taken during the time that *The Bluest Eye* takes place by visiting the Library of Congress' research guide "Great Migration: Finding Pictures" here: [guides.loc.gov/great-migration-pictures/introduction](http://guides.loc.gov/great-migration-pictures/introduction)

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors, illustrators, and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits: [library.ohio.gov/ctro](http://library.ohio.gov/ctro)

This toolkit revised March 2021.