

STRUCTURE

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

- In this unit, we shall introduce you to the famous American novelist Toni Morrison. She was a great novelist, essayist, editor, teacher and professor Emeritus at Princeton University. She was also the first black woman to receive the prestigious Noble prize in literature.
- In this unit, we shall discuss her life in brief and her major works. Then, we shall discuss in detail her famous novel 'The Bluest Eye' with its summary, analysis and plot overview.
- In the other two units (16th & 17th), we shall discuss its characters, themes, setting, tone, motifs, symbols and feminist perspectives of the novel. We shall also briefly discuss the technical aspects of the novel like writing style, language, diction and so on.

**15.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR/NOVELIST
TONI MORRISON'S LIFE AND WORKS**

Toni Morrison was born in 1931. She was born in Lorain, Ohio in a poor, close-knit family. Christened as Chloe Anthony Wofford, she grew up during the great depression of 1930s. She was the second of four children of George Wofford, a shipyard welder and Ramah Willis Wofford. Her parents had moved to Ohio from the south to evade racism and to find better opportunities in the north. Her father was a hardworking and a sincere welder who took pride in his work. Her mother was a

church going woman who participated in the church choir. The Woffords were proud of their black cultural folklore.

In 1949, she entered Howard University. She earned M.A. degree in English at Cornell University in 1955. Then she taught at the Texas Southern University from 1955 to 1957 and at Howard University from 1957 to 1964. She met a Jamaican architect Harold Morrison and married with him. The couple had two children and later they were divorced in 1964.

While Tony Morrison was teaching at Howard, she began to write fiction. After leaving her teaching job, she worked as an editor at random House, first at Syracuse, New York and in New York City. Her first novel 'The Bluest Eye' was published in 1970. It was an expansion of an earlier written short story. Soon she attracted readers and critics as a promising writer.

Tony Morrison's notable works include 'Sula' (1973), 'Song of Solomon' (1977), 'Tar Baby' (1981) and 'Beloved' (1987). She received Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988 and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. She was the first black woman to receive the most prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature.

15.2 BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO TONY MORRISON'S MAJOR WORKS

Tony Morrison wrote eleven novels and many essays, non-fictional books, plays and children's fiction. In 2012, president Barack Obama awarded her with the presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2016, she was also awarded the PEN/saw Bellow award for achievement in American fiction.

Tony Morrison's novels are both dreamy and surrealist. Her novels centre on black struggles of family relationships and cultural identity. 'The Bluest eye' is her first novel which is about Pecola, a young black girl who just wants blue eyes. Her prose is precise and charged with emotions of pain and wonder. It is like poetry with elements of history, folklore and music. 'The Bluest Eye' has been praised for its study of social marginalization. It exposes the idea of how aesthetic standards derived from white culture become detrimental to the pride and dignity of the blacks. The central theme of the novel is the domination of the blacks by prevalent standards of beauty – blue eyes, blonde hair and white skin.

Toni Morrison's next novel 'Sula' explores the moral ambiguity of individual choices made under social and racial pressure. It is the story of mother-hood, friendship and love. It is set in Ohio, a black town. It explores the relationship between women in patriarchal south. Sula and Nel became intimate friends who share all secrets of their life. In this novel Toni Morrison encourages women to unite with each other in the bond of sisterhood.

Toni Morrison's next novel 'Tar Baby' traces the struggle of an African American woman to find and keep her identity intact despite her lover's efforts to domesticate her. It traces the quest for self-identity by Jadine child the protagonist of the novel. It also explores the racial,

sexual and familial tensions faced by an individual in her journey towards self-actualization. The dominant themes of the novel are the shackles of femininity, nature versus civilization and youth and power. The novel is about conflicts based on learned biases and prejudices.

‘Song of Solomon’ was published in 1977. It is the novel about the life of a Macon “Milkman” Dead III, an African American man living in Michigan. Searching for identity is the theme of the novel. Toni Morrison’s deftly interweaves past and present and the discovery of the history of Milkman’s people. Flight is a basic theme of the novel which signifies an escape from miserable circumstances but it also scars who are left behind. The novel shows that women are not only oppressed by racism but they also have suffered for men’s freedom.

‘Beloved’ is the fifth novel by Toni Morrison published in 1987 and in 1988, it won the Pulitzer Prize. It was influenced by a published story about a slave, Margaret Garner, who in 1951 escaped with her children to Ohio from her master in Kentucky. When she was about to be recaptured, she tried to kill her children rather than returning them to a life of slavery. Only one of her children died and Margaret was imprisoned for her crime. She did not show remorse saying that she was “Unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done.” In ‘Beloved’ Toni Morrison chronicles the hardship Sethe and her family endure before, during and after American civil war. The novel deals with theme of racism, freedom, motherhood, memory and creativity. For the most part, the novel uses the third person narration and flashback to present action that occurred before the beginning of the story.

‘Jazz’ was published in 1992. It is a historical novel with past narrative that takes place in the Harlem during 1920s. The novel deliberately mirrors the title ‘Jazz’ with various characters improvising solo compositions that create the novel. The tone of the novel continues to shift with different compositions. The final narrator of the book is believed to be Morrison or perhaps the book itself. The novel tells the story of Violet, Joe and Dorcus in Harlem. The narration creates a complex web of people, places and stories. The themes of the novel are violence, motherhood, race, women and femininity.

‘Paradise’ is a 1997 novel by Toni Morrison. According to Morrison, it completes the trilogy that includes Beloved (1987) and Jazz (1992). The book is structured into nine sections. It is an impassioned story of reckless violence. The themes of the novel are paradise, exclusion, feminist martyrdom, ethno-centrism and small-mindedness of puritan ideology.

15.3 INTRODUCTION TO THE BLUEST EYE

‘The Bluest Eye’ is Toni Morrison’s first novel published in 1970. It tells the tragic tale of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl growing up in Lorain, the hometown of Morrison in Ohio. The story takes place after the great depression. Due to Morrison’s blatant portrayal of incest, prostitution, domestic violence and child molestation, there have been

several attempts to ban the book from libraries and schools across the United States.

In the afterword to the novel, Toni Morrison wrote that the novel came out of a childhood conversation she could never forget. She remembered a young black girl she knew who wanted blue eyes like Claudia MacTeer in the novel. Morrison was angry to hear this confession. In those days, she was inspired by the 'Black is Beautiful' movement of late 1960s and she decided to write a novel to depict how internationalized racism affected young black girls.

Pecola's obsessive desire to have the bluest eye is the sign of how black female body has become dominated by white masculine culture. Morrison presents a very powerful critique of way that black subjectivity continues to be represented in a commodity culture. The structure of the novel is complex and temporal. The novel captures the hidden cadences of speech with a keen sensitivity to the protean quality of words.

'The Bluest Eye' contains several autobiographical elements. It is set in the town where Morrison grew up, and it is told from the point of view of nine year old girl, the age Morrison would have been when the story taken place (1941). Like the MacTeer family, Morrison's family also struggled a lot to make both ends meet during the great Depression. Morrison grew up listening to her mother singing and her grandfather playing violin just as Claudia does.

Morrison's intention was to present black girlhood she highlights the fact that living in a world defined by Euro-centric beauty creates deep longing for whiteness and blue eyes demolishing the confidence and perceived beauty of young black girls.

15.4 PLOT SUMMARY OF THE BLUEST EYE

The novel opens in the fall of 1941, just after the great depression in Lorain, Ohio. Nine year old Claudia MacTeer and her ten year old sister Frieda, live with their parents in old and cold house. What they lack in money, they make up in love. They also live with a tenant named Mr Henry and Pecola Breedlove, a temporary foster child whose house was burned down by her alcoholic and sexually abusive father. Pecola is a passive black young girl whose parents always fought verbally and physically. Pecola was continually reminded of her black ugly body by neighbours and classmates. She longed to have blue eyes like the white American girls.

Pecola's life at home was highly abusive and miserable. Her father Cholly rapes her in the kitchen. Pecola becomes pregnant with her father's child. She visits Soaphead church, a quack psychic and healer. She asks him to give her blue eyes. Soaphead tells Pecola to give his dog some meat and if the dog acts strangely, she will receive blue eyes. In fact, Soaphead wanted hated the dog and gave her poison to kill it. The dog limps and Pecola believes that she will receive blue eyes.

Claudia and Frieda learn of Pecola's pregnancy through neighbourhood gossip. They hope for Pecola's child to survive. However, Pecola's child who is born pre-maturely dies. Pecola's imagination is

deluded and she goes insane. Through flash back the novel explores the younger days of Pecola's parents.

15.5 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BLUEST EYE

Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest eye' was written during the period of an emerging black aesthetics. It is an incisive probe into complex mental attitude of the black people's self-hatred. Morrison explores how aesthetic standards imposed by white culture become detrimental to the black people. It is not just personal aesthetics but of race, gender and class. It deals with Afro-American experience in the mid-nineteenth century when black people suffered from the effects of social marginalization.

The novel deals with black characters that are compelled to measure themselves in terms of western norms of beauty. Claudia MacTeer tells the story of Pecola Breedlove's tragic tale with flashbacks into her past childhood days. Claudia MacTeer shares her experiences and remembers how black women lived on the periphery of the society. Her narration contains Afro-American oral tradition with interplay of poetry and prose. The novel is like an extended blues lyric which also tells the life of the blues lived by its women characters. Blues are melancholic music of black American folk origin. Claudia's mother often sings blues while working in the kitchen. Women's singing of the blues represents racial struggles of the characters and also address gender oppression and class oppression in 'The Bluest eye'.

Mrs MacTeer is a poor struggling black housewife who always tries to instil a sense of pride and self-worth in her daughters. Claudia decapitates the white dolls and rejects the superiority of the whites. Pecola's experience inside the storefront represents a microcosm of violence and oppression. Pecola's parents Cholly and Pauline Breedlove enact the scenes of love and fierce battles to display their frustrations of life. Pauline rejects her own family in favour of her white employer's home and children. Pecola leaves her home and parents to live with MacTeer family. She dreams of having blue eyes like Shirley Temple a white beautiful girl. Pecola is deprived of milk which symbolises the lack of maternal nourishment.

Pecola lacks self-esteem because of her ugly black body and femaleness. She is unable to resist victimization because of western ideological concept that as a black young girl, she has no right to resist. She is raped by her father Cholly and becomes pregnant. The destruction of Cholly's ability to love results into his rape of Pecola. At the end, Pecola's insanity gives her a partial freedom because she has a hallucination that she has acquired 'the blue eyes' that make her acceptable and admirable.

Toni Morrison's one of the most important contributions in her ground breaking treatment of sex and sexuality. For her sex is an inevitable part of life like birth and death. She depicts full spectrum of sexuality that includes love, hate, joy, lust and compassion. She presents rape as symptomatic of race relations. Pecola's father rapes her which is

partly the result of Cholly's interrupted sexual experience by white men when he was a teenager.

In 'The Bluest Eye' the black characters often act violently towards other blacks. For example, the self-proclaimed spiritualist and psychic Soaphead cheat people by making false promises. He often molests girl telling them that his molestation is an expression of God's love through him. Pecola who is obsessed with the idea that only people with blue eyes are beautiful and lovable. She is cheated by Soaphead church when she goes to him to seek blue eyes. In fact, she is blinded by an obsession and illusion. Soaphead church knows that all black people have one common desire: to be loved and appreciated.

Pecola's rape by her father, the premature death of her child whom she conceived as a result of rape and Soaphead's trickery push her into insanity. In her mad state of mind, she lives in illusion that she has blue eyes. Morrison highlights the tragic phenomenon that Pecola's desire for blue eyes leads her to utter despair. Morrison also exposes how the false standards of beauty lead her to ultimate doom. The black people sense of inferiority is the result of patriarchal attitude of the White Americans. Pecola's embrace of this value system and her inferiority complex result into her tragic downfall. In 'The Bluest Eye', there are no black characters who come out of dark despair and fear. Most of the characters in the novel are internally enslaved.

Toni Morrison shows in this novel how the black community is weakened by divisions within it. In this novel, whiteness is presented not as a racial category but a norm against which all other races are measured. The story does not end with Pecola's downfall but with a voice of hope for survival by Claudia MacTeer. At the end of the novel, Claudia's call for redemption of black women is the message that Morrison conveys to the reader.

Unlike many American works that deal with slavery and racism, the general outline of the novel does not engage with such events but deals with self-hatred of the black people in general and of the black women in particular. By presenting characters who hate themselves because of what they are told they are, which reinforces racism and social hierarchy, Morrison explains what self-hatred is and where it comes from and how devastating influence it has on the lives of the people who are physically free but still bound by the society that keep them abhorring themselves.

Morrison recreates black speech through her novels restoring the language that black people spoke with its original power. Her prose has a quality of 'aural' literature. Responding to critics, Morrison says that her poetic prose is due to metaphors used in black speech naturally. Morrison wants the readers to participate in her novels actively. Her writing can be taken as a communal experience, a sharing of passion and ideas. She also uses magic, folktales and the supernatural in her novels as they are the part of the life of black people.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1

Answer The Following Questions In Brief.

1. Who do you think is the most sympathetic character in the novel? Why?

2. How does racism function in ‘The Blue Eyes’?

3. How does Morrison show Pecola’s environment and hostile attitude of American society towards blacks?

4. How does low self-esteem lead to Pecola’s identity crisis?

5. Who had the most negative role in Pecola’s life according to your view?

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which of the following is the distinguishing characteristic of Pauline Breedlove?

- (A) She has blue eyes
 - (B) She has a bad foot
 - (C) She has a curved spine
 - (D) She is balding
2. Why does Pecola stay briefly with MacTeers?
- (A) She was raped by her father
 - (B) She ran away from home
 - (C) Her father tried to burn down their home
 - (D) She was visiting her friends Claudia and Frieda
3. Where does Mrs Breedlove work?
- (A) At a school
 - (B) At a restaurant
 - (C) At the home of white family
 - (D) At the MacTeer's home
4. Who hates white baby dolls?
- (A) Frieda
 - (B) Claudia
 - (C) Pecola
 - (D) Maureen Peal
5. What important event occurs when Pecola is staying at the MacTeers?
- (A) She kills the family cat
 - (B) She is molested by Henry Washington
 - (C) She poisons the family dog
 - (D) She menstruates for the first time
6. Who had raised Cholly?
- (A) Aunt Jimmy
 - (B) Ms Dear
 - (C) His violent father
 - (D) Blue Jack
7. Which of the following characters is still alive when the story ends?
- (A) Cholly
 - (B) Pecola's baby
 - (C) Pauline Breedlove
 - (D) Aunt Jimmy
8. What flowers do Claudia and Frieda plant to save Pecola's baby?
- (A) Roses
 - (B) Dandelions
 - (C) Marigolds
 - (D) Lilacs

15.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we introduced Toni Morrison's life and major works. We also examined the plot summary of 'The Bluest Eye' and the critical analysis of the novel. In the following units, we shall deal with characters, major themes, setting, autobiographical elements, tone of the novel and other technical aspects in detail. We shall also examine feminist

perspectives in the context of the race, gender and class in the novel in the next units.

15.7 KEYWORDS

Blues:	Melancholic songs.
Chafe:	Become or make sore by or as if by rubbing.
Addled:	Confused or vague.
Strident:	Unpleasant loud or harsh.
Irrevocable:	Incapable of being retracted.
Peripheral:	On or near an edge / outer boundary.
Unsullied:	Spotlessly clean and fresh.
Plaintive:	expressing sorrow.
Acrid:	Strong and sharp as a taste or smell.
Elude:	To be incompressible to.
Dis-interested:	Unaffected by concern for one's own welfare.
Interminable:	Tiresomely long.
Chagrin:	Cause to feel shame.
Foist:	Force on to another.
Contrive:	Devise / work out a plan for.
Aural:	Related to ear or sense of hearing.
Dirge:	A song of mourning as a memorial to a dead person.

15.8 BOOKS SUGGESTED

- 1) Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1999).
- 2) Patrick Bryce Bjork 'The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place within the community' (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).
- 3) Lisa Williams, *The Artist as Outsider in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf* (Westport: Greenwood press, 2000).
- 4) Christian, Barbara (1980) "Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison" *Journal of Ethnic studies*.
- 5) Kochar, Shubhanku "Treatment of Violence: A study of Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye' and 'Beloved'" *Language in India* (2013).
- 6) Gordon, Lewis (1997) *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (Routledge).

ANSWERS

Check your progress 1

1. Claudia is the most sympathetic character in the novel. She has deep sympathy for Pecola. It is through her narration that we come to know about Pecola's sufferings. She is the one of the good characters who sympathise and help Pecola. Pecola after being raped by her father lives with her at her house. Claudia also wishes that Pecola's baby would survive.
2. 'The Bluest Eye' presents quite complicated portrayal of racism. The characters don't experience direct oppression but more

routinely, they are subjected to an internalized set of values that victimize them and cause self-hatred in black community.

3. Morrison describes Pecola's miserable life. Her father is alcoholic, cruel rapist who rapes her twice and impregnates her. Both her parents quarrel and fight all the time. The American norms of beauty white skin and bluest eyes created self-hatred in Pecola who hankered for getting 'The Bluest eye'.
4. Pecola grew up in the home of abusive father and neglectful mother. Pecola mocked and degraded her calling her ugly. This led Pecola to low self-esteem and self-hatred. She dreamt of attaining 'the bluest eyes' so that she would look beautiful and attractive.
5. Pecola's father had the most negative role in Pecola's life. Cholly was an alcoholic, violent and cruel. In fact, he suffered from emotional issues he had faced in his childhood days. He raped Pecola twice making her pregnant. The physical abuse suffered by Pecola led her to self-defeating feelings.

Check your progress 2

- 1-(B)
- 2-(C)
- 3-(C)
- 4-(B)
- 5-(D)
- 6-(A)
- 7-(C)
- 8-(C)