

STRUCTURE

16.0 Objectives

16.1 Character list of the novel *The Bluest Eye* (Brief overview of all important characters)

16.2 Character-Analysis

16.2.1 Pecola Breedlove

16.2.2 Claudia MacTeer

16.2.3 Cholly Breedlove

16.2.4 Pauline Breedlove

16.2.5 Frieda MacTeer

16.2.6 Other minor characters of the novel

16.3 Major themes of the novel *The Bluest Eye*

16.4 Setting of the novel *The Bluest Eye*

16.5 Autobiographical Elements in *The Bluest Eye*

16.6 Let us sum up

16.7 Key Words

16.8 Books Suggested

Answers

16.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to introduce you to the characters in the novel '*The Bluest Eye*' by Toni Morrison. Major characters in the novel are female that present Toni Morrison's feminine perspectives. All the important characters are black and the novel depicts how the general concept of beauty affects the black women who crave for 'bluest eyes' like Pecola – the protagonist of the novel.

In this unit, we shall also discuss major themes of the novel, setting of the novel and autobiographical elements in the novel. In-depth study of these topics will help the students to understand and evaluate the novel critically.

**16.1 CHARACTER LIST OF THE NOVEL THE BLUEST EYE
(BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ALL IMPORTANT CHARACTERS)**

Pecola Breedlove: Pecola is the protagonist of the novel 'The Bluest Eye'. She is eleven year old black girl who thinks that she is ugly and if

she had blue eyes, she would look beautiful. She is sensitive and delicate. She suffers the abuse of her father Cholly and neglectful mother. She lives lonely unhappy life.

Claudia MacTeer: She is the narrator of parts of the novel. She is independent and strong-minded despite being only nine years old. She is a fighter who rebels against the tyranny of adults over children and against the black community's idealization of white beauty norms. She is still free from self-hatred that most of the black suffer.

Pauline Breedlove: She is Pecola's mother. She too believes that blacks are ugly. This belief made her suffer from inferiority complex. She had a deformed foot she saw herself as a martyr of a terrible marriage. She experienced relief not in her family but in the romantic movies and white family where she worked.

Frieda MacTeer: She is Claudia's ten year old sister who shares Claudia's independence and stubbornness. Frieda has better knowledge about the adult world. Sometimes, she looks braver than her sister Claudia.

Mrs MacTeer: She is Claudia's mother who is callous and authoritarian. She often fusses a loud and sings blues.

Mr MacTeer: Claudia's father who works hard to feed the family. He is fiercely protective of his daughter.

Henry Washington: He is MacTeer's boarder. He is a steady and quite worker. He is a middle-aged man who has never married. He often behaves lecherously with women.

Sammy Breedlove: He is Pecola's fourteen year old brother who runs away from home. His active response contrasts with passive behaviour of Pecola.

China, Poland and Marie: They are local prostitutes who live above the Breedlove apartment. They befriend Pecola sharing their experiences and views.

Mr Yacobowski: A local grocer who behaves rudely towards black girls. He is a middle-aged white immigrant.

Rosemary Villanucci: She is a white girl who lives next door to MacTeers. She makes fun of Claudia and Frieda and sometimes Claudia and Frieda beat her up.

Maureen Peel: A light skinned rich black girl. She believes that she is superior and capable of both generosity and cruelty.

Cholly Breedlove: Pecola's alcoholic, impulsive father. He has suffered humiliations in his childhood and adulthood. This frustration made him violent rapist who raped Pecola and made her pregnant.

Geraldine: A middleclass black woman who cares for her appearance and that of the entire family.

Junior: Geraldine's son who becomes sadistic due to the absence genuine affection for her mother.

Soaphead Church: A light skinned West-Indian misanthrope and self-claimed. Reader, advisor and interpreter of dreams. He symbolises religious hypocrite.

Aunt Jimmy: Elderly woman who has raised Cholly.

Blue Jack: A co-worker and friend of Cholly.

M'Dear: Elderly doctor in the community where Cholly grew up.

Darlene: The first girl whom Cholly likes. She is playful and affectionate.

16.2 CHARACTER-ANALYSIS

16.2.1 Pecola Breedlove

Pecola Breedlove is a protagonist of the novel *The Bluest Eye*. Despite her pivotal role in the novel, she is passive and repressed. She also remains a mysterious character whose story is told by Claudia and other's point of view. Toni Morrison herself says in her novel's afterword that she wants to keep her mystery intact.

Pecola is a fragile and delicate child when the novel starts. At the beginning of the novel, two desires form the basis of her emotional life: (1) how to get people to love her (2) to run away from home as she is compelled to witness the violent fights between her father Cholly and mother Pauline. Neither of her wishes is fulfilled and therefore she is forced deeper into the world of fantasy. The fantasy world proves to be the only defence against her painful existence.

Pecola believes that she is ugly and therefore she becomes the victim of hatred and humiliation. She hopes to get blue eyes so that the attitude of the people towards her would change. At the end of the novel, she delusively believes that her wish for the blue eyes has been granted. Her delusion is the part of her insanity that makes her believe that her eyes are blue like the eyes of the white American girls. Pecola never gets release from her delusive, insane world. Her fate is even worse than death and she moves to "the edge of town where you can see her even now".

Pecola's story illustrates how the cultural conceptions of beauty would devastate the lives of black girls like Pecola. Pecola's desire to

achieve blue eyes is not only linked to the obsession about beauty in America but also among blacks who suffered from self-hatred and inferiority complex. Pecola thinks that if she were prettier with skin and blue eyes, her parents would not fight so violently.

Pecola is constantly victimized and humiliated throughout the novel. She is constantly teased and bullied. All these events of bullying and humiliations ultimately culminates into rape by her own father Cholly. She becomes pregnant and her baby dies prematurely. At the end, Pecola loses touch with reality. Unable to accept the fact that she has been raped by her own father, she begins to live in delusion that all the people look at her strangely because she has received blue eyes. Her young mind creates an imaginary friend who loves and affirms her at the end of the novel.

Claudia's last words about Pecola provide another lens through which we can view her character. As Claudia says, the people of Lorain used Pecola's ugliness in order to make themselves feel beautiful. Pecola, as Claudia describes looks like "a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach", (Morrison, 162). In afterword of the novel, Morrison writes, "the silence is at its centre: the void that is Pecola's 'unbeing'". Her fragmented identity is like "splintered mirror", the term Morrison herself uses. In afterword, Morrison writes, "She is not seen by herself until she hallucinates a self".

16.2.2 Claudia MacTeer

Claudia MacTeer is an important character in 'The Bluest Eye'. She is the primary narrator of the book. She is a curious, inquisitive, sensitive girl who grew up in Lorain, Ohio. She is the product of a loving family. Her narration is interesting in as it moves back and forth between her reflective, adult stance and innocent childhood.

Claudia is a rebel figure throughout the novel. Unlike Pecola and Frieda, Claudia tries to resist popular beauty icons like Shirley Temple. Instead, she identifies herself with Jewish women. When she receives a white baby doll for Christmas, she completely dismembers it.

Claudia's rebellious nature makes her treatment of Pecola different from others. Unlike others, she does not tease her but treats her kindly. At the end of the novel, Claudia and Frieda spend entire summer selling marigold seeds in order to buy a bicycle for themselves. When they learn about Pecola's pregnancy, they sacrifice their money for God with the hope that God would keep Pecola's baby alive.

When Pecola was bullied by a group of boys, Claudia attacks them. She also wants to save Pecola's baby from rejection by their black community, she has always saved herself from the sense of self-hatred that plagued the black people in Lorain. Claudia proves to be not only the messenger of suffering but of hope. Morrison salvages the Black woman by designating Claudia as the voice of survival. It is the character of Claudia that redeems the black woman in the end.

16.2.3 Cholly Breedlove

Cholly is Pecola's father who is always in drunken state. He is extremely abusive towards his family. He often fought with his wife Pauline and beat her. He is physically abusive to his wife but he is sexually abusive towards his own daughter Pecola. Cholly connects her blackness with ugliness and rejection by the society.

Despite his cruel behaviour towards his family, the readers can somewhat feel sympathetic towards him because of his miserable past experiences. His mother had left him on the junk heap near the railroad when he was only four days old. Aunt Jimmy reared him but with extreme strictness. Unfortunately, Aunt Jimmy died when he was fourteen years old.

Cholly blamed others for everything that happened to him. That is the reason why he turned alcoholic and violent. He was often bullied by white men. Once he was interrupted in his first sexual encounter with Darlene by armed whites. Not only did they interrupt his private act but they forced him to continue the interaction while they watched.

Cholly's character can be studied through psychological perspective, as he could not find a balance between his id and super-ego. He also struggled with the oedipal complex, raping his daughter Pecola. Cholly was utterly impulsive always doing what he wanted. Once he burned up his house making his family homeless. He never experienced the feel guilt after committing such crimes. His hatred for whites often turned towards his own family members, particularly his wife and Pecola.

16.2.4 Pauline Breedlove

Pauline Breedlove is Pecola's mother. Her most destructive characteristic is her unattainable desire for beauty. She always hankered for whiteness and hated herself for her black and ugly skin. When she was only two years old, she stepped on a nail which caused her to have a limp foot. She spent her entire life worrying about how other people perceived her. She believes that if could look beautiful if one looked like a white movie star. She often watched movie admiring white movie actress.

Pauline stopped caring for herself and began to treat people around her rudely. Her husband Cholly was alcoholic and violent. He abused her and often beat her. She had a terrible relationship with her children whom she neglected and hated for their ugliness and black skin. She stopped taking care of them or her home. She cared a lot for Fisher's home where she worked. The Fisher family was white, wealthy family, which she admired for their wealth and white skin. She cleaned and organized the Fisher family expressing her affection towards them and neglecting her own home and family.

Pauline bears her husband Cholly like a crown of thorns and her children like a cross. She survives through repression, amnesia and physical deformities like limping foot and loss of front tooth. Her inefficiency leads her to transfer her desire for clothes and other material possessions.

16.2.5 Frieda MacTeer

Frieda MacTeer is the elder sister of Claudia. She is more influenced by the black people's obsession with whiteness. Claudia hates Shirley temple but Frieda admires her beauty and white skin. Frieda is a brave girl who saves Pecola from the bullying of white boys. She hits one of the boys' head with her books. Her voice is also quite loud and clear. She is outspoken and clear in her thinking. She loves Claudia and they often share same opinions on many issues. They act together showing their caring spirit and warm heartedness. Like a true friend, she tries to help Pecola.

Like Claudia, she is also stubborn and independent. Freida is also more knowledgeable about the adult world. She is also very sensitive and concerned about Pecola. She is willing to stand by Pecola even when all other people are against her. They pray for the survival of Pecola's unborn baby who dies prematurely.

16.2.6 Other minor characters of the novel

Major characters in '*The Bluest Eye*' are female. There are some minor male characters in addition to the major important male characters – Cholly Breedlove. Soaphead is a religious hypocrite who symbolises the corrupt side of religion. He creates delusion in the mind of Pecola who begins to think that she has attained blue eyes.

Mrs MacTeer is Claudia's mother who sings blues all the time. She represents gloomy life of black women. Henry Washington was a boarder living in MacTeer's house. He never married but he often displayed his lecherous attitude towards women. Sammy Breedlove is Pecola's young brother who runs away from home. Mr MacTeer is the father of Claudia and Frieda. He is very protective of his daughters.

China, Poland and Marie are local prostitutes who live in Breedlove apartment. They were quite friendly with Pecola. Mr Yacobowski is a local grocer who treats black girls in humiliating manner. Maureen Peal represents the obsessions of the black girls for white skin. Due to her light skin, she regards her superior. Geraldine is a middleclass black woman who cares for her own appearance and that of the other female members of the family. Junior is Geraldine's son who does not genuine affection for his mother. Aunt Jimmy was the woman who saved and raised Cholly Breedlove. Cholly's mother had abandoned infant Cholly on a junk of heap near railroad. Blue Jack was a co-worker and friend of Cholly. Darlene was the first girl whom Cholly liked. She was quite playful and affectionate. Rosemary Villanucci is a white girl who lives next door to MacTeer family. Her arrogance made Claudia and Frieda angry and jealous.

In '*The Bluest Eye*', we come to know each of the characters through their actions, attitudes and thoughts. The families and childhood experiences shape their personalities. Morrison has used strange and iconic names in the novel. For example, Breedlove is ironic while MacTeer highlights compassionate nature of the family. Sex and love play a very important role in shaping the attitude of the major as well as

minor characters of the novel. Cholly's rape of Pecola expresses his self-hatred and disdain for women. Pauline dreams about love and sex losing her-self in the world of fantasy.

Toni Morrison in her 'Afterword' of the novel says that she wanted to create race-specific but race-free prose. She uses a lot of Afro-American vernacular in the novel to achieve race-specific and race-free prose.

MAJOR THEMES OF THE NOVEL THE BLUEST EYE

Themes represent fundamental and universal ideas in a literary work. In the Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* there are some very important themes as discussed below:

Colour of skin as the standard of beauty:

The Bluest Eye depicts the mind-set of the blacks regarding the standard of beauty. The black women in Lorain, Ohio suffered from self-hatred and inferiority complex as they considered whiteness as the standard of beauty and that is the reason why Pecola always dreamt of having blue eyes. Pecola's mother Pauline Breedlove also preferred white girls over her own daughter. Many adult women looked down upon their own children treating them as inferior and hateable. Claudia was the only rebellious black girl who refused to accept whiteness and blue eyes as the standard of beauty.

Sexual abuse:

'The Bluest Eye' deals with the pleasures and perils of sexual experience. Pecola is raped by her own father Cholly Breedlove. She experiences the perils of sexual initiation in violent rape. Frieda is fondled by Henry Washington initiating her into sexual pleasure. Cholly's first sexual experience was interrupted by two white men who forced him to continue his sexual act as they watched. The prevalence of sexual violence in the novel suggests that racism alone is not distorting experience for black girls but sexual abuse by their own people. There was a pervasive assumption that women's bodies are available for abuse.

The role of appearance in the society:

One of the most important themes in 'The Bluest Eye' is the role of appearance in the society. Pecola Breedlove is treated as ugly and hateable because of her black skin. All her family members and black people see themselves as ugly. Morrison often depicts segregation within the African-American community of dark skinned blacks and light skinned blacks. The light skinned blacks are regarded 'better' and closer to white community.

Race:

Whiteness in 'The Bluest Eye' is associated with beauty, innocence, goodness, cleanliness and purity. Race is a powerful determinant in the novel. Cholly is humiliated by the white men while he is losing his virginity. The humiliating experience made him alcoholic, violent and cruel towards his wife and Pecola.

Self-loathing:

In the foreword of the novel, Morrison states one theme of the novel: self-loathing and how it affects a person, particularly a child.

Morrison believes that cultural pressures in the United States generated self-loathing in many black people. Self-loathing often stems from 'double conscious' which makes the blacks in the United States look at themselves through the eyes of others. The dominant culture creates hatred in their minds towards their own identities. Pecola, Pauline Breedlove and Cholly suffer from self-loathing. Pecola's desire for blue eyes demonstrates her self-hatred and sense of inferiority.

Dangers of love:

Toni Morrison repeatedly raises the question of love. Love in the novel represents dangers. Love is first mentioned in relation to Pecola and her baby. Claudia describes pretending to love white baby dolls. At the end of "Autumn", Pecola asks, "How do you get someone to love you?" Claudia replies that such a question has never entered her mind. Throughout the novel, there are lines that cross between love and abuse, love and abuse etc. Three prostitutes who lived above Pecola's house offered their bodies to men for sex but they hated men. Soaphead Church pretended to love little girls but he often molested them. Thus, Morrison thinks that love can be messy, funky and dangerous.

16.3 SETTING OF THE NOVEL THE BLUEST EYE

The novel 'The Bluest Eye' takes place mainly in Lorain, Ohio in the USA. The story takes place in 1940s when there was still inequality between whites and non-whites. The United States gathered slaves from Africa in the early 1600s. For a few hundreds of years, Africans were treated as property and not as human beings. In 1863, the President of America signed a document called the Emancipation Proclamation. This document abolished slavery in America. However, discrimination of African Americans is still found in certain parts of USA. African Americans did not enjoy the same facilities as the white Americans like school, transport system and other public services.

16.4 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN THE BLUEST EYE

'The Bluest Eye' contains several autobiographical elements. The novel is set in the town where Morrison grew up. The story is told from the point of view of nine year old girl, the age Morrison would have been when the novel takes place (1941). Like 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 as Claudia does in the novel. In the novel's 'Afterword', Morrison explains that the story developed out of a conversation she had heard in elementary school in which a girl longed for blue eyes like white Americans. Morrison was still thinking about the conversation in the 1960s when the 'Black is Beautiful' movement was in vogue to reclaim African-American beauty. Morrison began her first novel 'The Bluest Eye' and published it in 1970s.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1

Long Answer Questions

1. Explain the basic theme of *The Blues Eye*.

2. What is the significance of the title *The Bluest Eye*?

3. Discuss Pecola Breedlove as the central character of the novel *The Bluest Eye*.

4. What is the greater threat to the children in *The Bluest Eye* – racism or sexism?

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2

Short Answer Questions

1. Name the four sections of the novel *The Bluest Eye*.

2. How does Mrs Breedlove's treatment of Pecola contribute to her self-hatred?

3. How does Claudia react to her baby dolls? Why?

4. What are the beliefs of prostitutes about surrounding men?

5. What do marigolds symbolize?

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 3
MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. The novel is divided into four sections named after
 - a) Four seasons.
 - b) Four directions.
 - c) Four sacred numbers.
 - d) Four winds in classical mythology.
2. Claudia MacTeer, the main narrator of the novel is Pecola's
 - a) Mother
 - b) Aunt
 - c) Sister
 - d) Friend
3. The time of the novel's events ties the story to
 - a) Vietnam war
 - b) Reagan's racism
 - c) World war II and the Nazi Regimes idea of beauty
 - d) The reconstruction era
4. Claudia's parents were
 - a) Stern but loving
 - b) Alcoholic
 - c) Abusive and cruel

- d) Over-indulgent
- 5. The actress that everyone adores but Claudia hates
 - a) Shirley Temple
 - b) Audrey Hepburn
 - c) Marilyn Monroe
 - d) Marlene Dietrich

16.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed all major characters with critical analysis. We have also discussed major themes of the novel, setting or context of the novel and autobiographical elements that are reflected in 'The Bluest Eye'. In the next Unit, we shall discuss Toni Morrison's style, tone, motifs and symbols in the novel. We shall also deal with an important topic of feminist perspectives in 'The Bluest Eye' in the next unit (Unit-17).

16.6 KEY WORDS

- Protagonist:** the main character in a play, film or book
- Tyranny:** the cruel and unfair use of power by a person or small group to control a country or state
- Inferiority:** the quality or state of being lesser or lower in rank, position, quality etc.
- Stubbornness:** unreasonably obstinate
- Callous:** made hard
- Lecherously:** erotically suggestive
- Misanthrope:** a hater of humankind
- Delusively:** misleading, deceptive
- Plagued:** an epidemic disease that causes high mortality
- Segregation:** a setting apart or separation of people or things from others or from the main body or group

16.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. Roynon, Tessa (2012) *'The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison'* Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
2. Morrison, Toni (2007) *"The Bluest Eye"* New York: Vintage International.
3. Kochar, Shubhanku *"Treatment of Violence: A study of Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye' and 'Beloved'"* Language in India (2013).
4. Morrison, Toni (2008) *Toni Morrison talks about her Motivation for Writing* YouTube National Visionary Leadership Project.
5. Alexander, Allen (1998) *"The Fourth Face: The image of God in Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye'"* African American review.
6. Spark Notes: *The Bluest Eye*: Character list www.sparknotes.com

ANSWERS

Check your progress 2

1. The four sections of the novel 'The Bluest Eye' are – Prologue and Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer. They are suggestive and symbolic. Autumn suggests beginning, winter suggests barrenness, spring suggests new life, change and fruitfulness. Summer in 'The Bluest Eye' does not symbolize pleasure but false, illusory pleasure of having blue eyes by Pecola.
2. Mrs Breedlove is cruel and abusive towards Pecola. She tells her all the time that she is ugly and unlikable. Terrified of her parents she is always intimidated. Such a cruel and inhuman treatment leads her to self-hatred and inferiority complex.
3. Claudia is a revolting black girl. She hates whites and the concept of beauty prevalent among black community. She destroys white dolls as an act of resistance against the idealized standard of beauty that uphold white features diminishing her own.
4. The three prostitutes live above the Breedlove apartment. Their names are China, Poland and Marie. They hate men and abuse them. They believe that all surrounding men are lustful.
5. Marigolds symbolize life, renewal and birth. Marigolds are planted by Claudia and Frieda with the hope that Pecola's baby will have a safe birth.

Check your progress 3

- 1- A
- 2- C
- 3- C
- 4- A
- 5- A