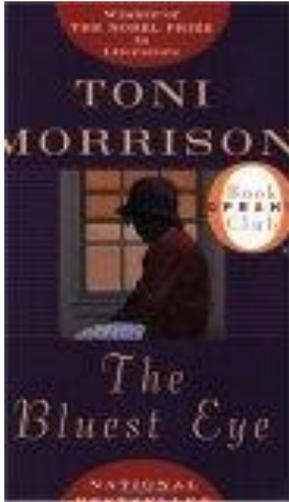


# The Bluest Eye

By Toni Morrison



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## ABOUT THIS 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.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*taken from [bookbrowse.com](http://bookbrowse.com)*

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?

## **Toni Morrison: 'I want to feel what I feel. Even if it's not happiness'**

*The Guardian* | Friday 13 April 2012

I first met Toni Morrison about 15 years ago, to talk about her seventh novel, *Paradise*, an encounter I remember largely for its number of terrifying pauses. Morrison, in her late 60s then, was at the height of her powers, a Nobel laureate with a famously low tolerance for journalists and critics, and a personal style as distinctive as her prose: silver dreadlocks, sharp, unwavering eye contact and a manner of speech – when she did speak – that, to her annoyance, people were wont to call poetry.

Now she sits in her publisher's office in New York, the city laid out beneath her. She looks as grand as ever, but there have been changes. It is right after lunch when, says Morrison, she is accustomed to napping. Guiltily?

"Not any more! At 81, I don't feel guilty about anything." (As she will explain, she appears here in role as Toni Morrison, as distinct from Chloe Wofford, her birth name and real self.) "So there!" Throughout the afternoon she is gloriously, unexpectedly giddy.

It is hard to believe Morrison is 81. She started late, her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, written when she was 39 and a senior editor at Random House. As a result, she is not pegged particularly to any generation of writers and since her subject matter is largely historical, or rather, concerned with the handprint of history on the present day, it gives her a kind of timelessness. Her characters are heroic and flawed, mythic and real, "unavailable to pity" she has said – vehicles for remembering, even, as Morrison wrote in *Beloved*, when "remembering seemed unwise". Chance would be a fine thing, these days, she says.

"There's nothing inside that's 81. It's just the changes in the body. And the memory. I don't remember where the keys are. Or as my son says, 'Ma, it's not that you don't remember where you put the keys, it's when you pick up your keys and you don't know what they're for.' Thank you, son." She laughs long and loud. "Everything that happened in the first 50 years of my life is dazzling and memorable. It's amazing, how the past is so clear. And the present is..." She bats a hand in the air.

Her latest novel, *Home*, is set in the aftermath of the Korean war and coincides with that sentimentalised period of American history that Morrison remembers rather differently. "I was trying to take the scab off the 50s, the general idea of it as very comfortable, happy, nostalgic. *Mad Men*. Oh, please. There was a horrible war you didn't call a war where 58,000 people died. There was McCarthy."

In *Home*, Frank, a veteran experiencing delusions brought on by post-traumatic stress disorder, and his sister, Cee, mutilated in a medical experiment, find their way home to a town called Lotus, which as teenagers they did everything to escape. It is a classic Morrison setting, a hardscrabble town with no redeeming features, redeemed nonetheless by the topography of love.

All are variations on Lorain, Ohio, where Morrison grew up, one of four children of a steel-worker and a housewife. Morrison can see both her parents in her character, her father's attitude of "disdain", her mother's openness. She always felt superior, she says, a superiority born of opposition, the gut push-back against low expectation, although she suspects it was also just in her from birth. She was a child of the 1940s, when segregation laws were still in place, but Morrison was self-possessed and inclined to speak up.

"Other people thought that I wrote well, when I was at school. And I remember one teacher showed some little essay I wrote to subsequent classes, as an example of really flawless writing. But the grade he gave me was B. So I asked him: well, if you think it's so great, why do I have a B? And he said, 'You misspelt raspberry.'" She throws back her head in laughter. "How do you spell raspberry?"

On the rare occasions Toni Morrison chooses to focus on criticism, it is this she comes back to: that before her work even "gets out the gate" it has already been taken as representative – of her race, of her gender – so it becomes less a novel than a sociopolitical statement. Morrison is fine with sociopolitical readings of her work, but the artist in her rebels against it being the only reading, particularly when her novels are held up against some preconceived notion of what, as a black woman, she "should" be writing about.

She felt this very strongly when she sat down to write *The Bluest Eye*. She would not, she decided, try to "explain" black life to a white audience. She would not write from the position of outsider to her own experience. She took issue with, for example, the title of Ralph Ellison's famous novel, *Invisible Man*; as she told the *New Yorker* in 2003, "Invisible to whom? Not to me."

She wanted to write from within. It was the era of "black is beautiful"; everywhere she looked in New York, the black power movement was promoting that slogan. It struck her both as true – "of course" – and at the same time,

ahistorical and reactive. "All the books that were being published by African-American guys were saying 'screw whitey', or some variation of that. Not the scholars but the pop books. And the other thing they said was, 'You have to confront the oppressor.' I understand that. But you don't have to look at the world through his eyes. I'm not a stereotype; I'm not somebody else's version of who I am. And so when people said at that time black is beautiful – yeah? Of course. Who said it wasn't? So I was trying to say, in *The Bluest Eye*, wait a minute. Guys. There was a time when black wasn't beautiful. And you hurt."

The idea for a novel about a black girl made to feel so ugly by the culture around her that she prays for blue eyes, came out of an encounter Morrison had as a child. A fellow classmate confided to her the same dream of blue eyes, which, even as a 12-year-old, struck Morrison as grotesquely self-loathing. She remembered it. "I wanted to know how she got to that place."

She had not herself suffered any such moments. She was Chloe Wofford then; Toni was a nickname that came out of her baptismal name, Anthony (after St Anthony), which she took at 12 when she joined the Catholic church. She knew who she was and puts it down to a combination of class – in her town, they were all poor together, black, white, Polish, Spanish – living in the same streets and attending the same high schools. Her parents were also fiercely resistant to outside influence. For a while, her family was on food aid, or "relief" as it was then known, a word Morrison finds preferable to today's language. "I liked that word. Because it was, like, it's just a pause. You're going to be all right, it's just 'relief'. And I remember my mother got some cornmeal or something and it had bugs in it. She wrote a letter to Franklin D Roosevelt. And his office answered! And the woman who dealt out this crap came to see my mother, and my mother said, 'You're giving us food with bugs in it?!' She was the type who tore eviction notices off the door."

Her father didn't trust anyone from outside. When Morrison was in her early teens, she got a job as a domestic in a white family's house. Looking back, she is inclined to think her white employer had a point when she yelled at her for being useless at the job. "I was so stupid, I'd never had a vacuum cleaner, my mother used a mop! And she had a very elaborate stove, which I didn't know how to use." At the time, she says, she took it very personally and ran home in distress. Her mother told her to quit, but she wanted the two dollars a week. Her father gave her a long, stern lecture that has stayed with Morrison all her life.

"He said, 'Go to work, get your money and come home. You don't live there.'"

She repeats it, slowly, with the air of revelation. "Go to work, get your money, come home." She was not obliged, he said, to live as they saw her in their imagination. Later, when Morrison was bullied at school, it had little effect on her, she says. "A little Italian boy called me an Ethiopian. 'Hee hee hee, you Ethiopian, you.' I went home and said to my mother, 'What is that?' And she said, 'It's a country in Africa.' And it was sort of like, what? He obviously thought it was a great insult." Morrison, dry as ice, says, "It was not impressive."

This attitude has, at times, landed her in trouble. "It limits you. It makes you insensitive to certain things, that later in life you should be sensitive to." She never took drugs, she says, not even as a teenager when everyone around her was smoking dope. "I did not want to feel anything that did not originate with me. Because the big deal, as they described it, was that it made you feel so good. I did not want to feel something that was dependent on it. I want to feel what I feel. What's mine. Even if it's not happiness, whatever that means. Because you're all you've got."

When she started *The Bluest Eye* she was the single mother of two boys, living in Syracuse, New York. She rose at 4am every morning to write before work. If she felt discouraged, she thought about her grandmother, who had fled the south with seven children and no means of support. Any existential panic – about her income, her prospects as a writer, her availability as a mother – evaporated in the face of daily necessity.

At one level, says Morrison, it was terrifically simple. "I was young. I started writing when I was 39. That's the height of life. The real liberation was the kids, because their needs were simple. One, they needed me to be competent. Two, they wanted me to have a sense of humour. And three, they wanted me to be an adult. No one else asked that of me. Not in the workplace – where sometimes they'd want you to be feminine, or dominant, or cute." She smiles. "The kids didn't care if I did my hair, didn't care what I looked like."

She had married Harold Morrison, an architect, after meeting him at Howard University in Washington DC and they had divorced six years later, leaving her with two sons, Harold and Slade. At Random House, she was first an editor in the textbook division and later, moved to offices in Manhattan, a fiction editor. She was supported at home by a network of women friends, who helped her with the kids, and some of whose fiction she published. As Morrison has said, "We read about how Ajax and Achilles will die for each other, but very little about the friendship of women."

The *Bluest Eye* had been published in 1970 and three years later she published *Sula* – the first time, she says, she really felt she was finding her voice. Nothing much can distract her when she's writing, she says, although after she won the Nobel prize in 1993, celebrity came close. And, she supposes, "the times I didn't write, maybe I was in love. Or beloved. Somebody was" – she bursts into laughter – "making me the object of love. It's not bad. It's short, but not bad."

Why short?

"I mean, you can't keep that up. Look, five years I spent on some books. I suppose you could love somebody for five years. Maybe. I don't mean lust. You can do that for ever. But I mean really love them, the way you say you love children. I don't know. But that means I would have to remember all the times I was in love." She bursts out laughing. "Oh, gaaaad."

Does she see that as a cost?

"It didn't cost anything. To me. Everything outside, cost. I had to do something, be somewhere. There were certain things I could do with ease. Teach. And read books. And write them. And that area seems very natural to me. Things outside it, except with very, very, very close friends, are a little bit of an act. I mean, not in a bad way. Social."

Game face.

"That's right. And I have separated those people. Myself is kind of split. My name is Chloe. And the rest is... that other person. Who is able to feel, or pretends to feel, or maybe really feels, or at least reacts to celebrityhood. "

Morrison's novels are often described as difficult, or poetic, neither meant as a compliment, and it drives her crazy. She writes at ground level, she says, in the vernacular of a people – poor, black – who, if their speech is unfamiliar to white readers, is not on the novelist's head. It is an overlooked fact that in some ways her novels are very conventional; *The Bluest Eye* is also a coming-of-age story; *Sula* is a romance.

Morrison spent three years thinking about *Beloved* before writing a word. It is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who killed her daughter rather than return her to slavery. As a novelist, it required her to pull off a seemingly impossible feat – to show how the condition of slavery exists outside of every human system, even language itself. "There's no language. And you have to have it. Or try. It always fails." She smiles. "Metaphor is clarifying, until it's overused, of course." It won the Pulitzer prize in 1988.

When Morrison was 17, she had tried out a thought experiment. She had just started college in Washington DC, "where they still had those signs in the buses. 'Coloureds only' and so on. And there was one place downtown

where a black person could go into the ladies room. And we all knew which one it was." On the news, she had seen footage of some white mothers in the south trying to turn over a school bus with black children in it. "I didn't know if I could turn over a bus full of little white kids. I didn't know if I could feel that... fury. And I tried very hard to. This is what I did: I said suppose... horses began to speak. And began to demand their rights. Now, I've ridden horses. They're very good workers. They're very good racehorses. Suppose they just... want more. Suppose they want to go to school! Suppose they want to sit next to me in the theatre. I began to feel this sense of – 'I like you, but...'; 'You're good, but...'. Suppose they want to sleep with my children?!" She's laughing heartily now. "I had to go outside the species! But it worked, I could feel it. You know; don't sit next to me."

What did she do with that insight? Morrison shrugs. "Nothing. I told somebody. A white person. And she was appalled. Not at what I had done, but it felt to her as if I was saying something about her. And I wasn't. I was trying to say something about how you can enter into that field. Because otherwise it doesn't make sense."

Anyway, she says, "The real thing is how we move forward. I was describing that thing of a mixed neighbourhood, of shared misery and shared joy. We were citizens. I mean we, African-Americans, were second-class citizens, but anyway, hopeful people. And then after the war we became consumers. Happiness in acquisition. And now we are only taxpayers. I'm going to give my tax dollars to those people?! If I'm only a taxpayer, I'm very upset. That's a different deal. A citizen has some connection to his neighbourhood, or his state or his country. The taxpayer doesn't."

There was a period, she says, when things got a lot better. A couple of decades of "sanity". When Obama was elected, Morrison says, it was the first time she felt truly American. "I felt very powerfully patriotic when I went to the inauguration of Barack Obama. I felt like a kid. The marines and the flag, which I never look at – all of a sudden it looked... nice. Worthy. It only lasted a couple of hours. But I was amazed, that music that I really don't like – God Bless America is a dumb song; I mean it's not beautiful. But I really felt that, for that little moment."

Now every other week from the stump Newt Gingrich refers to Obama as the "food-stamp president"; Mitt Romney accuses him of wanting to turn America into a "welfare state". Morrison does not take this language to be racially neutral. "Oh, that's very deliberate. Welfare, food stamps; gangs. They have a whole vocabulary of code. Some overt, come covert." She finds it "hateful", but beyond that embarrassing – "Really embarrassing for my country."

Look, she says: "I used to think there was a Republican attitude and language that, although I vehemently disagreed with it because I thought it was fraudulent, it wasn't dumb. It made some sort of sense. If you really and truly think that the United States is free, and capital is free – none of that's true, but if you really believe it – you can develop an argument that's not embarrassing. But they don't do that any more. They use coded words. Did you see that the other day – Rick Santorum said 'the man in the Whitehouse is a government nig – uh?'"

Yes, he says he misspoke. Morrison bursts out laughing. "He said he didn't say that! They used to say 'government nigger' when black people got jobs in the post office, stuff like that. And that's what he was saying. And earlier he said, 'I don't want to take your money and give it to bla – people.' He catches himself right at the vowel. Man. I guess it was worse in South Africa before Mandela, but I can't do it any more." She sighs. "At some level, you know, it hurts. It really hurts."

Morrison was once the mother of teenage boys; has the Trayvon Martin killing revived memories for her? "It has. There were instances, when they were teenagers. Being stopped in the car, and given a ticket because you had tinted glass or something. Little bits and pieces of police harassment that happened to be light because we were not living in New York and also – and I did not even tell them this, because I didn't know to – but they always said 'sir' to the police. Yes sir, no sir. I don't know where they got that from, but it worked."

How the case is handled from now on, she believes, may open up a dialogue on institutional racism in the US. "They keep saying, we have to have a conversation about race in this country. Well, this is the conversation. We'll see if it plays out, if it makes a difference in terms of not just the hate crime thing, but the law. It's not like it is on television. The police are ill-trained and they're corrupt, and they're protected, and that's what they do. All over. I don't mean all police, but the system itself is protective. So yeah, they're going to lie. [George Zimmerman's] father calls up, the ex-magistrate? He calls up. Then the state prosecutor comes to the police station to talk and the lead detective wants to arrest the guy and he says no. And now we're getting the demonisation of the kid. He was this, he was that, he wore his pants down."

Morrison finds herself thinking increasingly about the past, the dazzling memories of the first 50 years.

Home is bright and sharp and brutally real. When she sits at her desk, Morrison says, everything else disappears. "I feel totally curious and alive and in control. And almost... magnificent, when I write." The book is dedicated to her son, Slade, who died 18 months ago and in the face of whose death she found herself wordless. She could not work. She could barely speak and didn't want to hear comforting words from others.

"What do you say? There really are no words for that. There really aren't. Somebody tries to say, 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.' People say that to me. There's no language for it. Sorry doesn't do it. I think you should just hug people and mop their floor or something."

She tried to read a few books by writers about the death of their children but they annoyed her in the same way the comforters did. "Books that have been written about the death of a child, but are all about the author. And people who were trying to soothe me, were trying to soothe me. I never heard anything about him. They say it's about the living, it's not, it's about the dead."

She doesn't want "closure", she says. "It's such an American thing. I want what I got." Morrison gathers herself up. "Memory. And work. And" – she starts to laugh – "some more ibuprofen."