

The Bluest Eye Discussion Questions

III. Pecola Breedlove: From Blue Eyes to Dandelions

5. A "fetish" is an object that is widely and often mistakenly believed to be endowed with the magical power to change the conditions of people's lives. In the following passage, Toni Morrison would seem to suggest that Pecola treats blue eyes like a fetish. "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights — if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. [. . .] If she looked different, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (46). What magical power does Pecola believe that blue eyes possess? Is she right or wrong? Does Pecola need to reform her appearance? Or does she need to reform her perception?



Portrait of Pecola Breedlove by Ash Trowel

6. Although Pecola is clearly enchanted by white beauty standards, there are moments when she seems capable of looking beyond the narrow aesthetic standards to which most people conform. For example, when she is walking to Mr. Yacobowski's store, Pecola rejects the reigning consensus about dandelions and affirms that there is beauty to be found in such flowers: "Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty. But grownups say, 'Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere.' But [. . .] they were real to her" (47). Does Pecola's ability to perceive that the dandelions are "pretty" suggest that she might be able to perceive her own beauty? Why or why not?

IV. Pecola at the Grocery Store

7. A few minutes after she walks past the dandelions, Pecola walks into Mr. Yacobowski's grocery store and undergoes a shameful encounter that makes her feel unseen and unheard. Although Pecola makes eye contact with the blue-eyed storekeeper, Mr. Yacobowski does not return her glance: "She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition — the glazed separateness" (48). After leaving the store, Pecola walks back along the same sidewalk and passes the same dandelions. But this time, Pecola is not able to sustain her positive perception of the dandelions: "Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, 'They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds'" (50). How does her demoralizing encounter with the storekeeper change Pecola's perception of the dandelions? Why does the encounter cause her perception to change? Does Pecola's perception of herself change?

8. When Pecola points her finger at the Mary Jane candies, Mr. Yacobowski is unable to see what she is pointing at. "He cannot see her view — the angle of his vision, the slant of her finger, makes it incomprehensible to him" (49). Morrison's choice of words emphasizes that Mr. Yacobowski is unable to shift his perspective, to imagine himself into her shoes, to look at the display case from her point of view, to perceive what she might be looking and pointing at. How might that be symbolic?



The Bluest Eye discussion questions serve as a vital tool for delving into the intricate themes, characters, and social commentaries presented in Toni Morrison's profound novel. "The Bluest Eye," published in 1970, marks Morrison's debut and addresses complex issues such as race, beauty standards, and the impact of societal norms on individual identity. This article aims to provide a comprehensive guide to discussion questions that can enhance understanding and encourage critical thinking about the novel's themes and characters.

Understanding the Context of "The Bluest Eye"

Before diving into discussion questions, it is essential to understand the context in which "The Bluest Eye" was written. The novel is set in post-World War II America and follows the life of Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl who yearns for blue eyes, which she associates with beauty

and acceptance. The book explores the harsh realities of racism and the internalized self-hatred that can arise from societal pressures.

Thematic Exploration

The novel presents several themes that are ripe for exploration through discussion questions:

1. **Beauty Standards:** The concept of beauty is a central theme in the novel. Pecola's desire for blue eyes symbolizes a longing for societal acceptance and validation.
2. **Racial Identity:** The story delves into the complexities of being Black in America and the impact of systemic racism on self-worth.
3. **Childhood Innocence:** The loss of innocence is depicted through Pecola's traumatic experiences and the environment around her.
4. **Family Dynamics:** The relationships within Pecola's family illustrate the broader issues of dysfunction and neglect that can arise in marginalized communities.
5. **Community and Isolation:** The novel highlights how community can both support and alienate individuals, particularly those who do not conform to societal norms.

Discussion Questions for "The Bluest Eye"

To facilitate deeper understanding of the novel, here are some essential discussion questions categorized by theme:

Beauty and Identity

1. What does beauty mean in the context of "The Bluest Eye"?
 - How do societal standards of beauty affect the characters' self-perception?
 - In what ways does Pecola's obsession with blue eyes reflect broader societal issues?
2. How does Morrison portray the relationship between beauty and power?
 - Discuss how characters like Maureen Peal and Claudia MacTeer view beauty differently than Pecola.
3. What role does media play in shaping the characters' ideals of beauty?
 - How do the influences of magazines and movies contribute to Pecola's desires?

Race and Racism

1. How is the theme of racism portrayed through the experiences of Pecola and other characters?

- In what ways does Morrison illustrate the internalization of racism among Black individuals?
- 2. What significance does the setting of Lorain, Ohio, have in the narrative?
 - How does the historical context of race relations in America influence the characters' lives?
- 3. How do the characters respond to the racism they face, and what does this reveal about their identities?
 - Discuss the differences in responses between characters like Claudia and Pecola.

Family and Relationships

1. How does Pecola's family background contribute to her tragic circumstances?
 - Examine the dynamics between Pecola, her parents, and her siblings.
2. In what ways do the relationships between mothers and daughters in the novel reflect larger societal issues?
 - Discuss the impact of Cholly's and Pauline's actions on Pecola's sense of self-worth.
3. What role does community play in shaping the family dynamics depicted in the novel?
 - Analyze how the community's perception of the Breedlove family influences their treatment.

Childhood and Innocence

1. How does Morrison depict the loss of innocence in "The Bluest Eye"?
 - Discuss specific events that lead to Pecola's loss of innocence.
2. What does the narrative suggest about the impact of trauma on children?
 - How do Pecola and other children cope with the harsh realities of their environment?
3. In what ways do the perspectives of Claudia and Frieda contrast with Pecola's experiences?
 - How do their experiences reflect different responses to societal pressures?

Community and Isolation

1. What role does the community play in supporting or isolating Pecola?
 - Discuss the various ways community members contribute to or alleviate her suffering.
2. How does Morrison use the concept of 'the other' in the novel?
 - Analyze how Pecola is viewed by those around her and what this reveals about societal norms.
3. What does the novel suggest about the importance of solidarity among marginalized individuals?
 - Discuss instances where characters fail to support one another and the consequences of this lack of solidarity.

Critical Perspectives

When discussing "The Bluest Eye," it is essential to consider various critical perspectives that can enhance understanding:

- Feminist Criticism: Explore how the novel addresses issues of gender and the intersectionality of race and femininity.
- Psychological Criticism: Analyze the psychological impact of racism and beauty standards on the characters' mental health.
- Historical Criticism: Consider the historical context of the 1940s and 1950s in America and its influence on the narrative.
- Cultural Criticism: Discuss how Morrison's work reflects the cultural heritage and struggles of African American communities.

Conclusion

"The Bluest Eye" is a rich text that invites deep reflection and discussion on various themes and issues relevant to society. Utilizing discussion questions can foster a more profound understanding of Morrison's work, encouraging readers to think critically about the societal norms that shape identity and beauty. Engaging with these questions in a group setting can lead to enlightening conversations that resonate beyond the pages of the novel, highlighting the ongoing relevance of Morrison's insights in today's world. As readers grapple with the complexities of Pecola's story, they not only gain insight into her life but also reflect on the broader implications of race, beauty, and community in their own lives.

Frequently Asked Questions

What role does beauty play in 'The Bluest Eye' and how does it affect the characters' self-perception?

Beauty is central to the characters' identities and self-worth in "The Bluest Eye." Pecola Breedlove's desire for blue eyes symbolizes her longing for acceptance and love, reflecting societal standards of beauty that equate whiteness with worth. This desire leads to tragic consequences, highlighting the damaging effects of internalized racism and the pursuit of unattainable ideals.

How does Toni Morrison use the concept of 'the gaze' to explore themes of race and identity?

Morrison employs 'the gaze' to illustrate how characters perceive themselves and others through the lens of societal standards. The constant scrutiny and judgment from the dominant culture shape the characters' identities, leading to a distorted self-image, particularly for Pecola, who internalizes the negative perceptions imposed upon her.

In what ways does the narrative structure of 'The Bluest Eye' enhance its themes?

The non-linear narrative structure and multiple perspectives in 'The Bluest Eye' allow readers to see the complex realities of each character's life. This fragmentation mirrors the disintegration of Pecola's identity and emphasizes the intersection of personal and collective trauma, deepening the exploration of race, beauty, and familial relationships.

What is the significance of the character Cholly Breedlove in the novel?

Cholly Breedlove represents the impact of systemic oppression on personal relationships. His struggles with identity, masculinity, and trauma lead to destructive behavior, which profoundly affects his family, particularly Pecola. His character illustrates how societal issues can perpetuate cycles of abuse and dysfunction within families.

How does the setting of 'the Bluest Eye' contribute to the overall message of the novel?

The setting of post-World War II America, particularly the racially segregated community of Lorain, Ohio, serves as a backdrop for the characters' experiences and struggles. It contextualizes the pervasive racism and societal pressures that shape their lives, reinforcing the themes of alienation, longing for acceptance, and the harsh realities of living in a society that devalues Blackness.

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