

Contempt and descent in the bluest eye



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison examines what the degradation of people, by society, can result in. She sets her story in Lorain, Ohio in the 1940's, which is a society with white ideals and standards of beauty. Morrison demonstrates the effect such racist ideals can have on the people who do not live up to them, through her authentic style, her honest language, her ability to relate to her readers, and her specific structure which persuasively points the blame at not only society, in general, but the readers themselves. Using examples of both characters who fall victim to the society, and other characters who attempt to protest the unfair ideals, Morrison creates a moving story of the mental breakdown of a vulnerable girl, and the society and world which allowed her to descend. The honesty of Morrison's writing in *The Bluest Eye*, which is blunt and occasionally vulgar, is crucial to the development of the society in which the novel is set, and also to the development of characters and descriptions of their actions. The blunt approach which Morrison takes in *The Bluest Eye* commonly causes sentences to be direct and simple. However, there are also, at certain points, detailed descriptions and complex ideas, but such things still tend to be written in a simple manner. Morrison writes affectingly in "the freshest, simplest, and most striking prose" (*Critical Perspectives* 4). Morrison's careful attention to both the connotations of words and also the cadences of language allow the despair and oppression of the characters to be evident through their thoughts, words and behaviors (*Critical perspectives* 60). Although Morrison admits to having emphasized in her book "codes embedded in black culture" (*Bloom* 3), *The Bluest Eye* is written in an authentic voice that allows many identifiable themes and ideas to resonate to people of all races, genders, and ages. Morrison conveys her

understanding of a young girl's resentment towards a society which shuns her, through writing about girls like Claudia, who, although they are able to protest the black world's emulation of the white world by dismembering their white dolls, they cannot "destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of [their] peers, the slippery light in the eyes of [their] teachers when they encounter the Maureen peals of the world (Baum 12). Although this merely means that people who are opposed to the racism of their societies cannot rid the societies of their white ideals, Morrison depicts this idea in a "strangely familiar [yet] uncanny" way (Modern Critical Views 11). She does so by alluding to a specific person, whom any reader can call to mind, who is admired for things which are beyond his or her control, and therefore, beyond the control of anybody who does not possess them to attain them. Morrison writes with the rightful assumption that nearly all people have known a Maureen Peal. Morrison skillfully criticizes society for the unfair advantage and treatment it gives to the Maureen peals, by describing relatable "honey voices of parents" and "slippery lights" in the eyes of teachers. Through her diction in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows the insight of a naïve young girl, Claudia, and in particular, uses her insight to criticize society. Before the novel introduces Pecola's family, Claudia's family situation is revealed through her own narration, which depicts her family as a sharp contrast with the "Dick and Jane" primer story which precedes it. Claudia's family is portrayed as cold and unloving until she says "And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repined the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead"..." So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (Morrison 12). At such a young age, Claudia is only

<https://assignbuster.com/contempt-and-descent-in-the-bluest-eye/>

able to describe love in these limited terms, but it nevertheless evokes a feeling of warmth and family love. Morrison refers to Claudia's mother as "somebody with hands who does not want [Claudia] to die" in order to deliberately describe love in an ineloquent manner, which ultimately describes the kind of love which Mrs. MacTeer gives her daughter. The diction through which Morrison has Claudia narrate shows Morrison's understanding of the desires of a young girl in Claudia's situation. The specific words demonstrate Morrison's ability to identify with her characters and readers alike. When describing her resentment for white baby dolls, Claudia shares that "Had any adult asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been 'Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?' I could have spoken up 'I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone'" (Morrison 21-22). Morrison, through the voice of Claudia, writes about Claudia's desires, and is especially effective in arousing feelings of childhood happiness. By the engaging of the senses, Morrison calls upon the memories of the reader, and the reader, in turn, related to Claudia. Throughout the novel, Morrison writes through the voices of different narrators. However, many aspects of her writing style—such as her bluntness, and tendency toward simpler sentences—are consistent throughout. A prominent characteristic which can be attributed to a great deal of the novel is also the raw, bold way in which Morrison writes. In the section where Pauline Breedlove gives past accounts of her life and describes the start of her unhappiness, she says "I don't believe I ever did

get over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that" (Morrison 123). Morrison is blunt in her choice of speech for Pauline, and she is bold in the extremes Pauline uses to speak about the effect of losing her tooth on her life. The boldness of Morrison's style is also apparent in her choice to make Pauline's tooth loss the beginning of her unhappiness (Critical Interpretation 91). For Pauline, however, "the easiest thing to do would be to build a case out of her foot. This is what she herself did. But to find out the truth about how dreams die, one should never take the word of the dreamer. The end of her lovely beginning was probably the cavity in one of her front teeth. She preferred, however, to think always of her foot (Morrison 110). The honesty which Morrison writes with eliminates any form of discretion. Morrison writes, perhaps in the bluntest manner of the entire novel, about Cholly's rape of Pecola. Morrison does so by denying the reader "the cover of metaphor and confronts the reader directly with Cholly's violation of Pecola." She uses precise diction when she describes the beginning of the rape by saying "The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length" (Modern Critical Views 7). Morrison's writing in *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates her fearlessness as a writer, and as evidenced by her style, Morrison's honest and fearless way of writing gives her work an authentic voice, which is of major importance in *The Bluest Eye*. The structure of *The Bluest Eye*, which Morrison executed in a very unique way, contributes immensely to the novel as a whole. The structure of the novel is not only very fragmented with a lot of juxtaposition between adjacent sections, but it

<https://assignbuster.com/contempt-and-descent-in-the-bluest-eye/>

also features “ looping narrative lines, flashbacks and anticipatory predictions [which] similarly veil and qualify meaning” (Bloom 69). The *Bluest Eye* follows a structure of ironic counterpoint. The novel begins with a “ Dick and Jane” children’s story that serves mainly for its contradiction with the daily lives of the MacTeers and especially the Breedloves (Bloom 22). The story begins with “ Here is the house. It is green and white. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy” (Morrison 1). Sections of this story serve as titles that introduce their counterparts in the racist setting of 1940’s Lorain, Ohio. The green and white house of Dick and Jane introduces the Breedlove’s “ irritating and melancholy” storefront apartment, and the family in this apartment could not be any different from the family in the story. While the father in the story is strong and smiling, Cholly Breedlove is a bitter alcoholic. The happy family in the story contrasts with the poor and miserable Breedloves (Bloom 22). The “ Dick and Jane” primer is important not only because it provides “ a particular set of expectations of modes of behavior, but because it locates these expectations and behaviors in a realm of immutable archetypes– equivalent to the Platonic idea of ‘ real’ ” (Critical Perspectives 62). Therefore, since no such family and home can exist, Morrison repeats the same text twice more, first eliminating the punctuation and uppercase letters, and next eliminating all of the spaces as well. Morrison does this to “ break up and confuse” the story (Bloom 50). The primer story which Morrison uses as the first part of text in *The Bluest Eye* effectively serves to juxtapose the real lives of the people in Lorain, Ohio, as it directly precedes a short italicized passage in which Claudia narrates, in retrospect, recalling to memory the events of the novel. In this section,

<https://assignbuster.com/contempt-and-descent-in-the-bluest-eye/>

Claudia remembers “ but so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola’s baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right...It never occurred the either of us that the Earth itself might have been unyielding.” Although Claudia, in this section, reveals the fate of Pecola and her baby to the reader, Morrison’s objective in the novel is to focus on the questions of process, not of the final causes (Peterson 53). Morrison proves this motive through writing “ There is really nothing more to say-except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.” Thus, Morrison sets the stage for the structure throughout the rest of the novel. Morrison is effective in dealing with the “ how” by breaking up the novel into sections-both fragmented by seasons, and by the narration of a young Claudia. Such a structure as the one she uses allows the novel to delve deeper into the mind of the characters and allows the reader to understand the psyche of even the most antagonistic characters. The novel has this structure for a very particular reason; Morrison aims to “ explore the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart” by facing Pecola with a series of rejections (some routine in nature, and some exceptional), all the while trying to “ avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to” (Morrison xii). Morrison’s structure accomplishes this. By describing the early lives of Pecola’s parents (those who contributed to the falling apart of Pecola) and all of the demoralizing and dehumanizing experiences that Pecola’s parents were faced with, Morrison takes part of the blame off of them. Similarly, Morrison goes into detail about the lack of caring that Junior’s mother had for him, and explains that she had more affection for the cat as Junior grew up.

While she in no way attempts to justify their wrongful treatment of Pecola, Morrison establishes an understanding in the reader, that each of Pecola's parents was "no less of a victim" than Pecola was (Bloom 78). Pecola was doomed for this sort of a fate, as a result of the way were parents were similarly doomed. Since Pecola's father had never experienced, and therefore never understood, the love of a parent, especially that of a father, he had no way of knowing how to treat his daughter. Cholly loved his daughter, but he was a dangerously free man: "Free to feel whatever he felt- fear, guilt, shame, grief, love pity" (Morrison 159). Cholly was "alone in his own perceptions and appetites and they alone interested him" (Morrison 160). Directly before Cholly rapes his daughter, he wonders "What could he do for her-ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven year old daughter" (Morrison 161). The description of Cholly's life and the way in which he came to be the way he presently is in the novel, leads up to the moment where he wonders these things. The years of degradation, abandonment and humiliation lead Cholly to wondering how to treat his own daughter, and what he could do for her. The breaking down of Cholly by society, which is demonstrated prior to the rape, wreaks its havoc in the end of the section, when he desperately wonders how he, as a father, should treat his daughter (Peterson 32). Morrison attributes the blame to the people and society who did the "trashing" of Cholly, because he ends up a character for whom ultimately "no glory is possible" (Critical Perspectives 2). By structuring the novel in such a way that the reader is shown early glimpses into the lives of characters who seems evil and antagonistic later on, such as Junior, Pauline and Cholly- glimpses which demonstrate the racial self contempt which they

<https://assignbuster.com/contempt-and-descent-in-the-bluest-eye/>

have suffered, or general self contempt and anger- Morrison effectively points the critical finger at the society which “ did the smashing.” Another important element of the structure of *The Bluest Eye* are the fragments narrated by Claudia MacTeer. These fragments serve two purposes; they provide a timeline by the seasons of the year, which parallel the collapse of Pecola, and they also provide a more sturdy foundation and interesting view of the events which happen to Pecola. The narrative starts in the fall, when only small bits of Pecola’s racial self-contempt can be detected. At this early stage in the novel, it is not even seen as self-contempt; it is seen merely as the desire for blue eyes, and the admiration of Shirley Temple. However, Pecola is aware all along of her apparent “ ugliness.” She sees support for it leaning at her from “ every billboard, every movie, every glance.” Pecola later becomes aware that it is her blackness “ that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (Critical Perspective 28). Pecola’s inherent belief in this idea throughout the novel continually breaks her down more and more. The breakdown of the seasons is not only for movement and passage of time. The seasons provide ironic and brutal comments of Pecola’s descent into madness (Critical Perspectives 61). Her collapse is not only the result of her rape and her baby that dies, but also the small commonplace circumstances along the way, such as the way the shopkeeper looks at her when she buys the Mary Jane candy, the way students at school always target her, through tormenting her and bullying her, and the way that her mother abuses her, yet shows affection to a young white girl. As the seasons progress, Pecola’s dejection becomes more apparent. Evidence of her coming collapse could be seen even before she is raped by her father, when she stands with her “ back hunched over the

sink”, and “ her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow” (Morrison 161). Claudia is a necessary and powerful element in the novel, because of the perspective she offers. Although it seems as if Pecola’s story takes a back seat to that of Claudia for most of the novel, Claudia’s input and narration are necessary and effective. Centering the weight of the novel on such a delicate and susceptible character as Pecola would not have been a successful means of structuring the story, because the reader would be persuaded into pitying Pecola, rather than examining themselves for doing the “ smashing” (Morrison xii). Therefore, Morrison invented the character of Claudia, to serve as someone who observed the change in Pecola throughout, and whose perspective is important in the final analysis of Pecola. “ The use of Claudia as the child narrator of Pecola’s Descent into madness seems to be one of Morrison’s most brilliant strokes. Obviously Pecola does not have the necessary distance, space or time to know what is happening to her. She cannot look at her own story in hindsight, for she goes mad” (Critical Perspectives 62). As a result of Claudia’s narration, Claudia, in a way, becomes a “ grieving voice to the graveness of Pecola’s situation” (Critical Perspectives 64). The breakdown of the structure of the novel into the seasons and narration by Claudia, is essential to the progression of the novel. Many elements of Morrison’s technique in *The Bluest Eye* serve to enrich and enhance the novel. A prominent technique in *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison’s use of the perspectives of children. In several situations, Morrison portrays children as naive and unknowing, but their comments and questions always hold a certain profundity in their essence. For instance, “ Like many children, Pecola asks questions that are disconcerting for both their naiveté and their insight.

She poses one such question at the age of eleven: ‘ How’ she asks Frieda and Claudia, ‘ Do you get somebody to love you?’” (Peterson 22). Although this question seems naive, in its nature, it demonstrates irony because it is actually an essential question that many of the novel’s characters are faced with. While the children cannot think of an answer, they do not realize that the novel provides a number of exemplary answers, through the “ neighborhood whores caustic camaraderie, her parents’ desperate fights, the sterile ‘ nesting’ of bourgeois black women, and most destructively, Pecola’s rape by her father” (Peterson 22). Through Morrison’s technique, she also incorporates small comments from main characters which are strewn in the narrative in a deliberately brief manner, but which lend a great deal of importance to the reader’s understanding of the character’s perception of certain things, and also cause the reader to think further about what was said. An example of such a comment is when Pecola decides “ Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence” (Morrison 44). The fact that Pecola perceives love in such a way reveals that she has been exposed to circumstances in which love was tainted or corrupt. After all, Pecola has been exposed, mostly to the love of her parents, and “ love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly” (Bloom 72). Therefore, it is likely that Pecola’s views of love would be skewed, as her only exposure to adult love has been skewed. The naiveté of the young characters in the novel, which is important throughout the entire course of the novel, can also be observed in the decision that Frieda and Claudia make, of how to help Pecola. When their seeds do not grow, it does not occur to either of them that “ the Earth itself might have been unyielding. [They] had dropped [their]

seeds in [their] own little plot of black dirt, just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. [Their] innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair" (Morrison 1-2). The idea that perhaps the Earth was unyielding is a more radical interpretation than the idea that it was merely by chance. The darkness that is associated with the Earth being unyielding toward certain types of seeds, further ingrains the loss of innocence in the novel, and the darkness which the world can harbor. Morrison uses a technique of youth losing their innocence through tragic and traumatic events. With the use of this technique, she is able to point the finger at society, for destroying innocence in children, through the likes of their racial contempt and prejudice. Morrison has an "ideological design upon us, her guilty readers, white and black, male and female" (Bloom 48). The technique of emphasizing the innocence and naiveté in children is also effective because it is juxtaposed against the terrible things which eventually happen. The coming to terms, of Claudia and Frieda, with the darkness which they encounter is a symbol of their despair." The Bluest Eye launches a critique of perceived norms of beauty and morality" (Peterson 56). The norms of beauty and morality, and the ideals which society projects onto its victims are what lead to the tragic end of the novel, the eventual descent into madness of Pecola Breedlove. The novel deals mainly with the way that people can be impacted by racial contempt and by the feelings of inferiority which are a result of such contempt. Morrison develops this theme by examining the effects that racial contempt (and rigid ideals of beauty and worth in a society) have on the most vulnerable possible character, young Pecola. To emphasize the societal discrimination, Morrison incorporates Maureen Peal, a "high-yellow dream child" who "enchanted the entire

<https://assignbuster.com/contempt-and-descent-in-the-bluest-eye/>

school,” to serve as a means of juxtaposition against Pecola. Maureen is adored by teachers and adults, unlike Pecola, and she is liked by all of her classmates. These things are true, merely because Maureen has the appearance of having come from a wealthy, together family, and because she has expensive clothing, and lighter skin. The extent to which Morrison describes the admiration of Maureen truly describes the society of Lorain, Ohio in the 1940’s. The society adores people like Maureen Peal, who have money and beauty (according to its ideals), and scorns people like poor Pecola, who has nothing in her life, and who is oppressively “ ugly”. The theme of the entire novel is found in this simple juxtaposition (Peterson 120). The theme goes deeper than merely society’s impact. The closing paragraph of the novel says: “ This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late.” The closing paragraph addresses the very core of the theme of The Bluest Eye. The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers, causing the seeds to not grow. However, there is a parallel between this stated fact, and Pecola’s circumstances in her life (Critical Perspectives 92). She can be compared to the seeds which the soil does not nurture, in that her life does not allow her to be happy, to succeed, or even just simply to be. The Earth does not nurture Pecola, or the marigold seeds, in the way it nurtures other flowers, and other people. Claudia, in retrospect looks back and recalls how people had decided that since Pecola’s baby died, it did not deserve to live, and she knows that it is not true. Pecola was never nurtured or treated fairly by the people of Lorain, and Claudia knows that her baby deserved to live, but it is also clear that Pecola’s

treatment by the people will inevitably never change. The paragraph closes with a tone of despair, when Claudia decides that it does not matter. Once Pecola is driven to insanity, Claudia and Frieda do not see her anymore because their feelings of having failed her are too painful and shameful to cope with. Their attitudes, which progress from ashamed almost to indifference are similar to the way that the Earth will not nurture Pecola or her baby. Morrison writes about other characters in the novel who the Earth will not nurture, such as Pauline and Cholly, but both of these characters found their own comforts; Pauline's focuses on her housekeeping and Cholly turns to alcohol. However, Pecola's passive and vulnerable nature as a character allows for only one possibility; her descent into madness. A major and underlying theme in *The Bluest Eye* is the hostility of nature and of the world, in general, toward some people, and their impossibility of reaching ultimate glory. Morrison writes this novel with the purpose of criticizing the society and people who create, admire, and live by these certain ideals which are unattainable by many people. Through her use of a fragmented structure, simple diction, and of the exposure of the naiveté of characters, Morrison brilliantly and movingly paints a picture of a young girl who is the victim of a society, of the loss of the innocence of girls who believe they can help this victimized character, of the most crushing and impossible combination of circumstances for a vulnerable girl to withstand and come out okay, and of what generations of racial self-contempt can cause. Morrison writes crushingly and convincingly of a young girl who has no chance to be happy in a society in which she is not accepted. Works Cited Bloom, Harold. *Toni Morrison*. New York: Chelsea House, 1990. Print. Gates, Henry Louis. *Toni Morrison Critical Perspectives past and Present*. <https://assignbuster.com/contempt-and-descent-in-the-bluest-eye/>

New York: Amistad, 1993. Print. Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Knopf, 2000. Print. Peterson, Nancy J. *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997. Print. Bibliography Bloom, Harold. *Toni Morrison*. New York: Chelsea House, 1990. Print. Bloom, Harold. *Toni Morrison*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2005. Print. Gates, Henry Louis. *Toni Morrison Critical Perspectives past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993. Print. Mbalia, Doreatha D. *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 1991. Print. Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Knopf, 2000. Print. Page, Philip. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995. Print. Peterson, Nancy J. *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997. Print.