

A deviation of  
expectations in toni  
morrison's "the bluest  
eye"



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Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* depicts a chilling tale of a young girl's experience with racism following The Great Depression. While the span of the novel is divided into four seasons, "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring," and "Summer," it is through the characters' experiences that we see its failure to actually meet the traditional expectations of these seasons. Morrison's framing of time through the use of natural seasons serves as a juxtaposition to illuminate the unnaturalness of her characters' lives. Morrison begins the novel with the season of "Autumn," a traditional time of crisp air, harvesting, and beautifully coloured leaves falling from tree limbs, however these expectations are quickly undermined through the experiences of her characters. We can first notice a juxtaposition of the beauty of autumn which, in this case, serves to illuminate the Breedlove family's ugliness. In a revealing introduction of the Breedlove family, Morrison's primary narrator, Claudia MacTeer, remembers the appearance of the Breedloves' storefront house which would "foist itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy" (32). Claudia suggests that the storefront was not a temporary place of residence for the Breedloves, but rather one of permanence because "they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (38). While the Breedloves' ugliness, as a whole, is "unique" (38), their lack of beauty is most obviously demonstrated through the character of Pecola Breedlove, the youngest member of the Breedlove family whose self-esteem we can see slowly diminishing as the natural cycle of the seasons advance. Pecola's ugliness and her obsessive longing for blue eyes in hopes that "she herself would be different" (46), provide a striking contrast between the expectation of beauty in autumn and the beauty that Pecola so desperately yearns for, but severely

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lacks. In this way, Morrison uses the season of "Autumn" not only as a division of the narrative, but as a tool to underline the Breedloves' unnatural lack of beauty, specifically through Pecola, against the expectations of a traditionally beautiful season. The plot continues to deviate from the expectations of what autumn typically symbolizes when Claudia recalls the beginning of Pecola's sexual maturation in which she starts "ministratin" (31). Pecola's coming of age in the "raw October wind" (57) proves to be somewhat ironic in that her newly adopted maturity carries with it the possibility of pregnancy and new life, characteristics not usually symbolized by autumn, yet something that leads to the beginning of her loss of innocence and foreshadows her ultimate demise. We can also note the discrepancy between what is expected of autumn and what actually happens through Claudia's sickness; "I cough once, loudly, through bronchial tubes already packed tight with phlegm" (10). Remembering her mother looking after her during her illness, Claudia recalls: "When I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who do not want me to die" (12). Morrison uses Pecola and Claudia's unnatural experiences to draw attention to the discrepancy between what would typically be expected in the natural cycle of autumn as compared to what actually happens. As "Autumn" transitions into "Winter," so too does Pecola's rapidly declining self-esteem. As the course study guide discusses, Pecola's gradual "rejection of herself" (16) can most clearly be seen through the alienation she experiences by her peers, especially Maureen Peal, "a high yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back" (62). Claudia remembers winter as something that "had stiffened itself into a hateful knot that nothing could loosen" (62) except for Maureen Peal, a "disrupter of <https://assignbuster.com/a-deviation-of-expectations-in-toni-morrison-the-bluest-eye/>

seasons" (62). After befriending Pecola for a very short period of time, Maureen is quick to turn on Pecola and the girls, and in a spat calls them "black and ugly black e mos" (73), serving to effectively break down Pecola's already weak exterior of self-confidence and self-worth even further. While winter is a season that is traditionally associated with hibernation and an unchanging state of being, Pecola's changing and steadily declining psychological state is reflected in the snowflakes she sees "falling and dying on the pavement" (93) following her exit from Geraldine's house after being called a "nasty little black bitch" (92) over a crime she did not commit. Like the dying snowflakes on the pavement, so too is Pecola's self-esteem dying. The course study guide confirms Pecola's mental deterioration when it explains that "what the change from 'Autumn' to 'Winter' means for Pecola is [a] gradual shift to a vision of herself that is as unforgiving as the shift of seasons is inevitable" (17). Morrison uses the change in Pecola's mental state to contrast the expectations of a characteristically changeless winter season, again drawing attention to the discrepancy of what is expected of natural seasons by providing the opposite of these expectations through her character's experiences. While the connotations of spring usually consist of rebirth and renewal, happiness and awakening, Morrison's "Spring" time frame in the novel wildly deviates from its traditional expectations of the season and is severely tainted by a series of a horrific set of events. The reader is first given an idea of Claudia's disposition towards spring when she remembers the branches of the trees that "beat us differently in the spring" (97); "Instead of a dull pain of a winter strap, there were these new green switches that lost their sting long after the whipping was over" (97). Claudia depicts the negativity that still remains in her memory of spring when she

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states, " Even now spring for me is shot through with the remembered ache of switchings, and forsythia holds no cheer" (97). The negativity does not end here; Morrison's interpretation of spring proves to be full of disappointment, corruption, and death for her characters. In the chapters telling of Cholly Breedlove's childhood, we see him remember his Aunt Jimmy's death: " It was in the spring, a very chilly spring, that Aunt Jimmy died of peach cobbler" (135). Cholly also experiences disappointment when after travelling to Macon to find his father, he is ultimately rejected and treated in a hostile nature upon their only encounter. Pecola, too, experiences disappointment when after accidentally spilling the berry cobbler, " Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly" (109), in which she " could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl" (109). The events that take place in " Spring" are significant because their negative nature serves to highlight their unnaturalness in correlation with the expected characteristics of the season. The corruption of " Spring" first manifests itself in the character of Soaphead Church, a once priest who practices perversion through touching little girls, and the corruption only continues when Frieda, Claudia's sister, is inappropriately touched by their house guest, Mr. Henry. However, the most unnatural act that occurs in the entirety of the novel is when Pecola is raped by her father, Cholly, " on a Sunday afternoon, in the thin light of spring, [after] he staggered home reeling drunk and saw his daughter in the kitchen" (161). We later learn that this is the first of two times she will be assaulted by her father, and as a result is impregnated with her father's child. Despite Pecola's pregnancy actually following the pattern of the spring season <https://assignbuster.com/a-deviation-of-expectations-in-toni-morrison-s-the-bluest-eye/>

through the expectations of rebirth and renewal, the act itself still functions as a deviation from the norm because it is tainted by the unnaturalness of the act. In this case, what is expected of "Spring" is completely opposite of what happens. Morrison creates a juxtaposition to highlight the horrific and unnatural events that occur simultaneously with the naturally occurring cycle of the seasons. The final season of the novel, "Summer," concludes the one year span of the story while serving to depict the exact opposite of what the season would typically characterize. The expectations of a fruitful earth, growth, and fulfillment, are negated by the unyielding nature of the earth and unexpected death. Claudia's introduction of the season foreshadows the negativity that is to follow: "I have only to break into the tightness of a strawberry, and I see summer, its dust and lowering skies. It remains for me a season of storms. The parched days and sticky nights are undistinguished in my mind, but the storm, the violent sudden storms, both frightened and quenched me" (187). While "the earth itself might have been unyielding" (introduction) in the case of Claudia and Frieda's marigolds that ceased to grow, so too was Pecola's "plot of black dirt" in which Cholly Breedlove "dropped his seeds" (introduction). Claudia recalls that though "the baby came too soon and died" (204), it was Cholly "who loved [Pecola] enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death" (206). The unnaturalness of unyielding earth paralleled with the death of Pecola's baby is followed by her ultimate loss of sanity in which "she spent her days, her tendrils, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear" (204). A critic of the novel, Sharon Gravett, provides an <https://assignbuster.com/a-deviation-of-expectations-in-toni-morrison-the-bluest-eye/>

interesting perspective when she explains that Claudia “ sees the cycle of the year moving from the dying season of fall to fall again, which serves as an ironic counterpoint to the tale of Pecola Breedlove, who comes of age, is raped and impregnated by her father Cholly, goes mad, and loses her baby. [Morrison] uses the seasons with their patterns and changes to comment on similar or ironic developments within the human community” (89). Gravett also comments on the unfruitful nature of the season and its deviation away from what one would expect of summer, explaining that the novel “ ends in the blasted hopes of a life that has failed to bloom. Focusing on the death of life and hope rather than the rebirth” (94). Through the symbolism of the marigolds resistance to grow and the death of Pecola’s baby, Morrison almost suggests signs of a disruption in the natural order of the seasons. It is through these unnatural events and the characters’ subsequent experiences that we see Morrison’s juxtaposition of the natural cycle of the seasons. While seasons occur in an unchanging and predictable pattern, the lives of Morrison’s characters do not appear to follow the same linear order of predictability. The four main sections of the novel, “ Autumn,” “ Winter,” “ Spring,” and “ Summer,” not only serve as a means of framing time, but as a way of drawing attention to the discrepancy between the natural expectations of each season and what actually happens regarding the development of the story and the characters’ experiences. Through her characters’ lives, especially that of Pecola Breedlove, Morrison provides a significant distortion of the natural order of the seasons which parallel the characters’ experiences. Pecola begins sexual maturation in the fall, is alienated by her peers and loses all self-esteem in the winter, is raped and impregnated by her father in the spring, and loses her baby and eventually

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loses sanity as a result in the summer. A critic of the novel, Thomas Fick, explains Morrison's technique of framing time through the use of seasons as a device which "marks off a parody of rebirth and growth" (10). In this way, it is through the natural cycle of the seasons that we are able to see just how unnatural the events and experiences that effect Morrison's characters are.

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