THE BLUEST EYE

August 27–September 24, 2023

ADAPTED BY
Lydia R. Diamond

FROM THE NOVEL BY
Toni Morrison

DIRECTED BY
Andi Chapman

aNW Edu

STUDY GUIDES FROM **A NOISE WITHIN**

A rich resource for teachers of English, reading, arts, and drama education.

Dear Reader,

We're delighted you're interested in our study guides, designed to provide a full range of information on our plays to teachers of all grade levels.

A Noise Within's study guides include:

- General information about the play (characters, synopsis, timeline, and more)
- Playwright biography and literary analysis
- Historical content of the play
- Scholarly articles
- Production information (costumes, lights, direction, etc.)
- Suggested classroom activities
- Related resources (videos, books, etc.)
- Discussion themes
- Background on verse and prose (for Shakespeare's plays)

Our study guides allow you to review and share information with students to enhance both lesson plans and pupils' theatrical experience and appreciation. They are designed to let you extrapolate articles and other information that best align with your own curricula and pedagogical goals.

More information? It would be our pleasure. We're here to make your students' learning experience as rewarding and memorable as it can be!

All the best,

Alicia Green
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Pictured: Erika Soto, *Much Ado About Nothing* Spring 2023.
PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THANK YOU

A Noise Within gratefully acknowledges the generosity of our ANW Edu donors. Your support allows us to produce award-winning productions of classic plays as well as reach more than 18,000 students in a typical year through our extensive education programs.

BCM Foundation

California Arts Council

Dwight Stuart Youth Fund

Los Angeles County Supervisor Kathryn Barger

Mara W. Breech Foundation

Michael & Irene Ross Endowment Fund
of the Jewish Community Foundation
of Los Angeles

Sally & Dick Roberts Coyote Foundation

Steinmetz Foundation

The Ann Peppers Foundation

The Capital Group Companies
Charitable Foundation

The Green Foundation

The Kenneth T. & Eileen L. Norris Foundation

The Michael J. Connell Foundation

The Youssef & Kamel Mawardi Fund

Rose Hills Foundation

CALIFORNIA ARTS COUNCIL

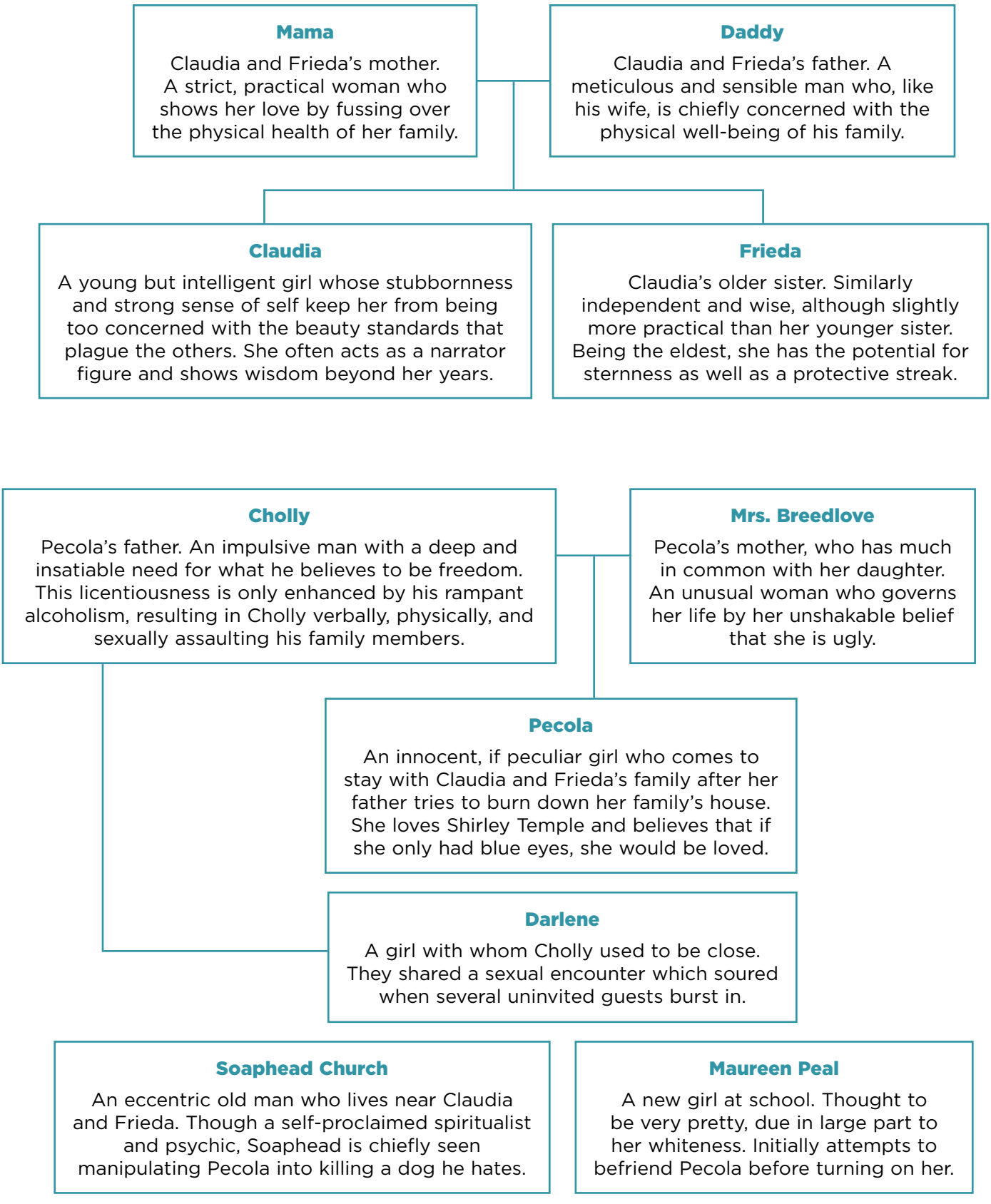
This organization is supported in part by the California Arts Council, a state agency. Learn more at www.arts.ca.gov.

Los Angeles County Arts & Culture

This organization is supported in part, by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Department of Arts and Culture.

Cover Image: Akilah A. Walker. Photo by Daniel Reichert.

CHARACTER **MAP**

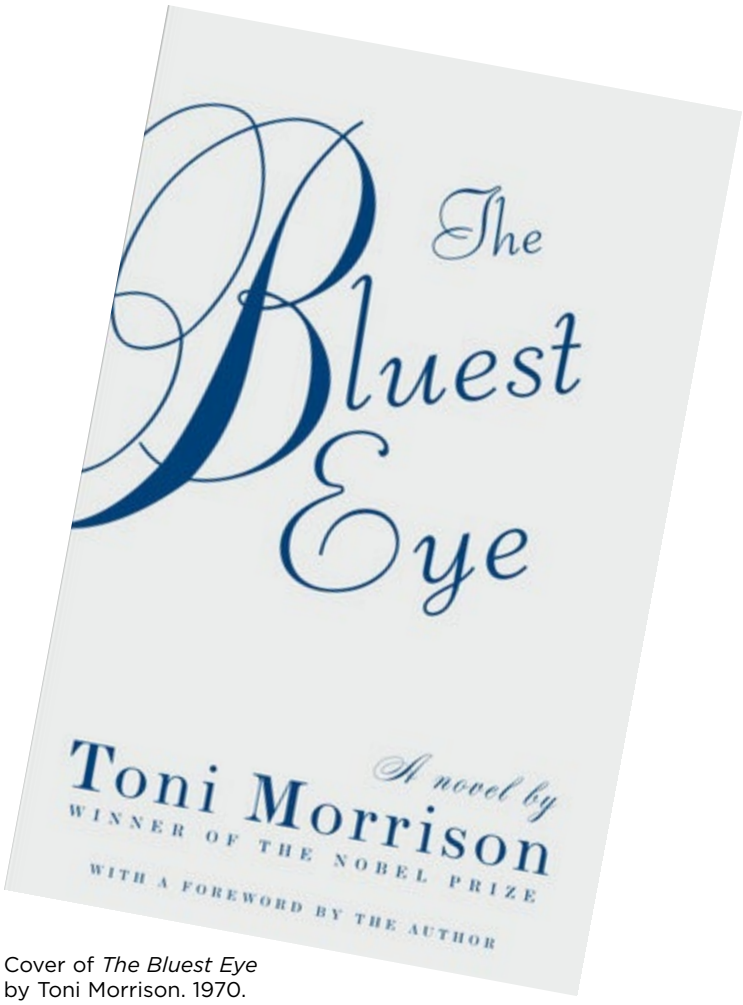


SYNOPSIS

It's 1941, shortly after the end of the Great Depression, and young sisters Claudia and Frieda live in a modest house with their Mama and Daddy. Though their parents are chiefly concerned with keeping their family clothed, fed, and warm, there is no shortage of love shown toward the two girls.

In the autumn, the family takes in a young girl by the name of Pecola Breedlove. Pecola is said to come from a peculiar household. She is obsessed with Shirley Temple, a figure that exemplifies the beauty that Pecola feels she so desperately lacks. She comes to stay with Claudia and Frieda's family because her father, Cholly, reportedly burned down their house. The Breedloves' origins and history are revealed slowly over the course of the play through narrated flashbacks. Mrs. Breedlove discusses her stubborn self-hatred and the racism she experienced while giving birth to Pecola. She uses movies to escape her reality and spends more time with the white family she works for than she does with her own. Her husband, Cholly, a troubled and violent alcoholic, relives the death of the aunt who raised him and a scarring encounter wherein two white men forced him to have sex with a woman while they watched.

This trauma led to an unhappy marriage riddled with verbal and physical abuse. Pecola becomes fast friends with Claudia and Frieda and as the three girls brainstorm how to spend their days, Pecola gets her first period. As autumn transitions into winter, a new girl named Maureen Peal starts attending the girls' school. She is light-skinned, popular, and seemingly kind, and Pecola idolizes her while Claudia remains skeptical. Claudia is proven correct when on a walk home, Maureen makes fun of Pecola and her family. After the incident with Maureen and after being ignored by a grocer, Pecola feels ugly and invisible. She believes that if only she had blue eyes, the world would pay attention to her. As spring begins, Pecola returns to her home, leaving Claudia and Frieda bored. They visit Pecola at her mother's workplace, which culminates in the destruction of a pie and a clear indication that Mrs. Breedlove values her workplace more than her daughter. One day later, Cholly returns home and sees Pecola doing the dishes. In a fit of rage, guilt, and misplaced attraction, he rapes her (the rape is described, not depicted onstage) and leaves her lying unconscious on the kitchen floor. Spring changes to summer and news spreads throughout the town that Pecola is pregnant with her father's child. Although most of the town thinks it would be better if the baby died, Claudia and Frieda pray for it to live. The girls spend their own money on marigold seeds and plant them, believing that if the marigolds live, so will Pecola's baby. Meanwhile, Pecola visits Soaphead Church, a self-proclaimed spiritualist, and asks him to give her blue eyes. He uses her to kill a dog he hates and leaves her confused and alone, believing for all the world that her eyes changed color. Pecola's baby dies, and she goes mad and becomes completely delusional, believing that she at last has the blue eyes the world told her were so much better than her own. ♦



Cover of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. 1970.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: **TONI MORRISON**

Photo portrait of Toni Morrison by Bert Andrews. 1970.

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on February 18th, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. Racial discrimination was a constant in her life from a young age, with the owner of her family's apartment setting fire to the building with the Woffords inside after they fell behind on rent. In a 1993 interview she commented on the absurdity of this act: "If you internalized it you'd be truly and thoroughly depressed because that's how much your life meant. For $4 a month somebody would just burn you to a crisp" ("The Laureate's Life Song", *The Washington Post*). Throughout her life, however, Toni took the circumstances she was given and turned them into opportunities for incredible creativity and insight. In elementary and middle school, she was a voracious reader, even securing a position as the secretary for the head librarian at the Lorain Public Library. At the age of twelve, she converted to Catholicism, adopting the baptismal name Anthony after Saint Anthony of Padua. This is the origin of her nickname Toni.

In 1949, Morrison began her college education at Howard University, a historically Black institution. In addition to earning a bachelor's degree in English, Morrison met many of the artists and activists who would influence her work for years to come. She went on to get her master's degree in English at Cornell University and began teaching at Texas Southern University shortly afterwards. In 1957, she returned to Howard University as a professor of English and met architect Harold Morrison. The couple married and had two children, Harold and Slade, but divorced in 1964.

Following her divorce and the birth of her son Slade, Morrison moved to Syracuse, New York and began editing textbooks with Random House Publishing. After two years, she transferred to the New York City division to edit fiction and works by Black authors, becoming the first Black female senior editor in the fiction department. Although Morrison had yet to publish her own works, by this point in her life she had already exerted influence over literary culture and helped to pull Black literature into the mainstream. In 1970, at the age of 39, Morrison published her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. In 1973, she published her second novel, *Sula*, which was nominated for a National Book Award in 1975. Although already well-known in literary circles, Morrison's third book *Song of Solomon* launched her into the spotlight, earning a National Book Critics Circle Award as well as vast critical acclaim.

In 1983, Morrison left publishing to devote more time to writing. During this period, she wrote many novels, essays, and plays, including *Beloved* (1987) which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and was a bestseller for 25 weeks. For her contributions to American culture and arts, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, becoming the first Black woman ever to do so. She continued to accumulate accolades in the later years of her career, including the Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

Throughout all of her writing, Morrison lifted up and celebrated Black culture and identity, shining a light on systemic racism and speaking out through her works against the injustices perpetrated against Black people in America. This dedication to telling stories from historically undervalued perspectives attracted the American public, with *Beloved* being adapted into a feature film in 1993, the Library of Congress naming her a Living Legend in 2000, and Oprah featuring her books in Oprah's Book Club four separate times.

In 2010, as Morrison was halfway through writing her novel *Home*, her son Slade, with whom she had written several children's books, died of pancreatic cancer. When *Home* was published in 2012, Morrison dedicated it to Slade, who she said would have wanted her to keep writing. She continued to do so for seven more years, until she passed away from complications of pneumonia at the age of 88 on August 5, 2019. Her legacy continues to inspire readers and writers everywhere, and her dedication to the celebration of Black identity has cemented her in the fabric of culture and literature in America and around the world. ♦

Edited from:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1993/10/08/the-laureatess-life-song/10d3b79b-52f2-4685-a6dd-c57f7dde08d2/

ABOUT THE ADAPTOR: **LYDIA R. DIAMOND**

In April of 1969, Lydia Diamond was born Lydia Gartin in Detroit, Michigan. After her parents divorced at a young age, Lydia was raised chiefly by her mother, who was a musician. Since she grew up in a very artistic family, Lydia always found herself drawn to the arts. Her artistic inclinations kept her company as she and her mother moved to wherever her mother's work took them. Though her family hoped she might follow in her grandfather's footsteps and play the violin, she turned to theatre instead after joining the drama club in high school. It wasn't until her college years at Northwestern University that Lydia discovered a love of playwriting as well.

While she was at Northwestern, Lydia received the Agnes Nixon Playwriting Award for her first play, *Solitaire*. In 1991, Lydia graduated with a B.A. in Performance Studies and met John Diamond, whom she would marry in 1996. After graduating, she founded her own theatre company, Another Small Black Theatre Company With Good Things To Say and A Lot of Nerve Productions, putting up several of her own plays in Chicago and expanding her playwriting repertoire.

Shortly after the birth of their son in 2004, the Diamonds moved to Boston for John's job. There, Lydia made a name for herself as a playwright, but found it somewhat difficult to adjust to the new location, as she lacked the support system she had in Chicago. Despite this, she began to thrive, with Company One in Boston producing her adaptation of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Boston University inviting her to teach. A year later, the same company produced her play *Voyeurs de Venus* which shares themes of beauty and racial tensions with *The Bluest Eye*.

Since the production of *The Bluest Eye*, Diamond has become well-known and well-liked in playwriting circles. Her play *Stick Fly*, produced by Alicia Keys, played on Broadway in 2011 and 2012 and in 2017, *The Bluest Eye* was produced by the Guthrie Theater in Minnesota.

Lydia Diamond Expanding the African American Narrative. Photographer unknown. 2013.

Today, Lydia Diamond is known both as a playwright and a professor. She has received the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award as well as countless other accolades. She often incorporates underrepresented perspectives and adapts stories as part of her work, making her the perfect person to bring *The Bluest Eye* from the page to the stage. ♦

TIMELINE OF ***THE BLUEST EYE*** & TONI MORRISON

Toni Morrison, author, with her sons Harold and Slade at their upstate New York home. By Bernard Gotfryd. c 1980-1987.

1931
Toni Morrison is born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Ohio.

1933
The Wofford family's landlord burns down their apartment with them inside.

1943
Chloe "Toni" Wofford marries Harold Morrison and adopts the name Toni Morrison.

1961
Morrison's first son Harold is born.

1964
The Morrisons divorce.

1965
Morrison's second son Slade is born and Morrison moves to New York to work in publishing.

1969
Lydia R. Diamond is born Lydia Gartin in Michigan.

1970
The Bluest Eye, Morrison's debut novel, is published.

1977
Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon,* is published and wins the National Book Critics Circle Award.

1987
Morrison's most well-known novel, *Beloved*, is published.

1988
Beloved wins the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

1993
Morrison becomes the first Black woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

2000
The Library of Congress names Morrison a Living Legend.

2007
Lydia R. Diamond's stage adaptation of *The Bluest Eye* premieres at Company One in Boston.

2010
Slade Morrison dies of cancer. Morrison stops writing and processes her grief.

2012
Morrison publishes *Home* and dedicates it to Slade. Barack Obama presents Morrison with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

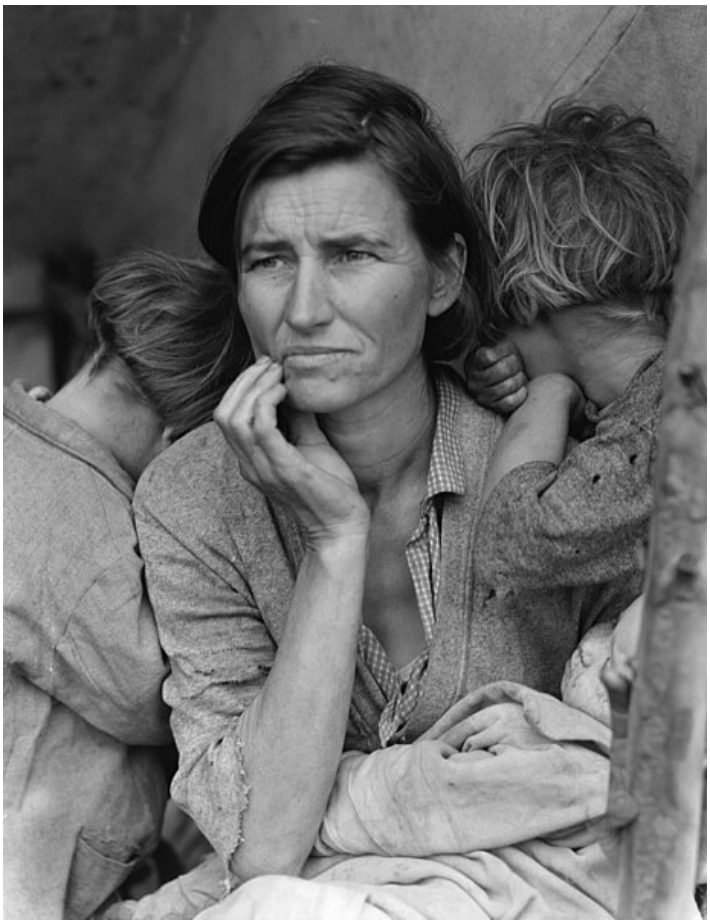
2019
Toni Morrison dies of pneumonia at the age of 88.

THE **GREAT DEPRESSION**

***The Bluest Eye* is set in 1941,** directly after the end of the Great Depression. The effects of the Depression are palpable throughout the story, with Claudia and Frieda's Mama and Daddy particularly feeling its influence. As many people today are aware, prolonged periods of financial instability take a toll on a person, and it isn't easy to break away from frugality when times turn good again. The characters of Mama and Daddy supported themselves and two children through the worst global economic downturn the industrialized Western world had ever seen. Although the Depression was felt in countries across the world, this article will focus on its impact in America, as that is what would most have affected the characters in *The Bluest Eye*.

Although there is no firm consensus on what exactly started the Great Depression in America, most scholars agree that the 1929 stock market crash was one of the main factors. Stock prices rose throughout the 1920s as the US economy benefited from European rebuilding efforts post-WW1. Unemployment was low, and the automobile and other innovations created efficiencies. As stock prices continued to rise, people began to see wealthy people making money in the stock market and started investing more, pushing the value of stocks even higher. As prices went higher, investors began borrowing money from banks to buy stocks. This is when stocks became worth much more than the actual value of the company they represented. People were buying stocks on credit, but the rise in stock prices wasn't based in reality since investors bought only in anticipation of a continued rise in stock prices. In 1929, the economy stumbled amid overproduction and weakening demand, and companies were forced to sell their products at a loss, leading share prices to fall. As this happened, investors started selling to be able to pay back their loans, making stock prices fall even faster, which led to panic selling and ultimately, the collapse of the stock market.

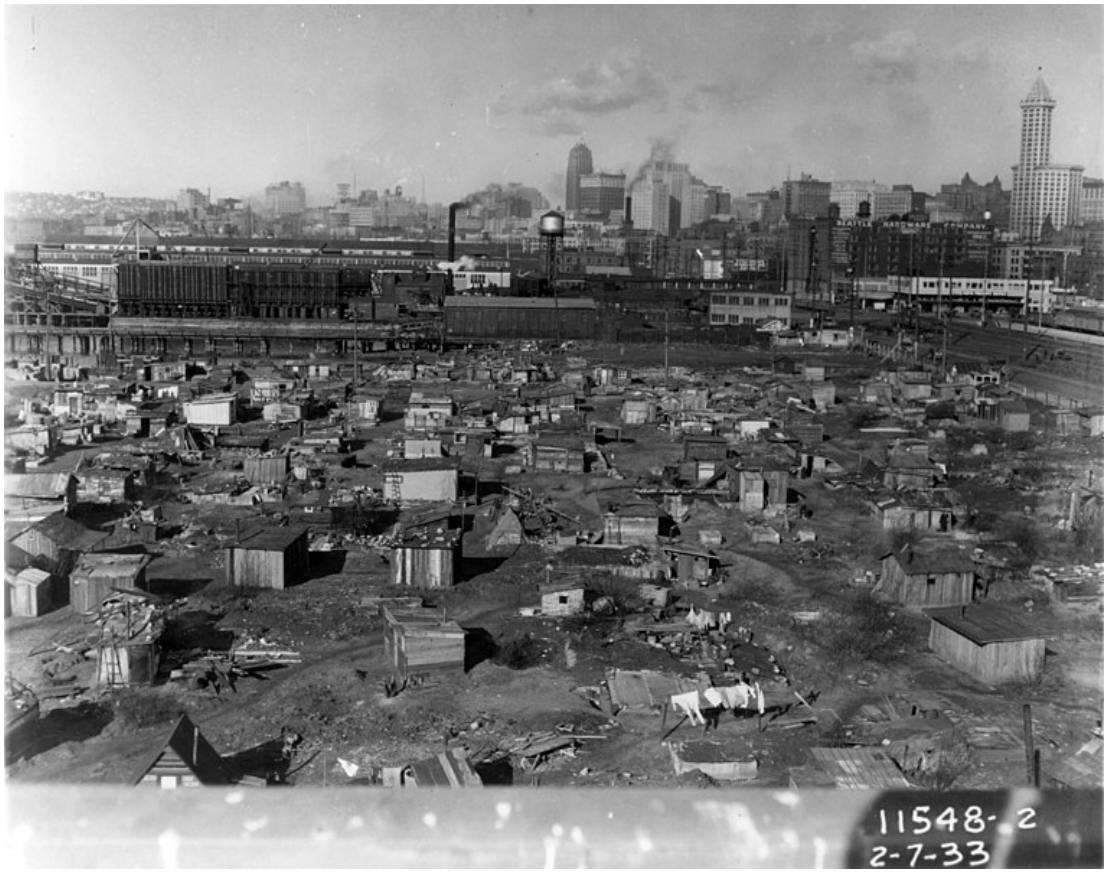
With the stock market crashing, people panicked and attempted to withdraw too much money from the banks all at once, causing one-fifth of all American banks to go out of business and people all over the country to lose money and their faith in the banks. Additionally, large swaths of the country were hit with severe droughts which, when paired with the lack of soil-preserving practices, caused a devastating loss of crops. This increased job loss among farming communities and food insecurity throughout the country.



Migrant mother, Nipomo, California by Dorthea Lange. 1936.

For the average American, money was tighter than ever before. With unemployment up to a staggering 25% nationwide, many people chose to move in with relatives or take in boarders in order to make rent. Even with the lost crops and lost jobs, most Americans didn't starve, though many did experience malnutrition and illness. The rise in unemployment naturally led to a rise in homelessness, since there was no unemployment insurance and very few households had more than one breadwinner. As a result, ramshackle towns constructed out of boxcars, debris, and trash began to become common sights. These shantytowns were colloquially called Hoovervilles, a deliberate jab at then-president Herbert Hoover, who many blamed for the Depression's severity. Like the homeless encampments today, many Hoovervilles were repeatedly destroyed by the police, leaving Americans to shelter on benches and under bridges.

THE **GREAT DEPRESSION** CONTINUED...



Hooverville on the Seattle Tideflats by Seattle Municipal Archives. 1933.

In discussions about the Great Depression, many people ignore or forget the massive impact that racism had on unemployment and homelessness. Racial politics surged during this time, the ever-present racism of the Jim Crow era exacerbated by white Americans who suddenly decided to apply for jobs that they previously considered beneath them. Unemployment may have been 25% nationwide, but it was well over 50% for Black Americans, reaching over 60% in certain parts of the country. Workers of color were frequently passed over for jobs if white workers applied, and in many cases were even fired to make room for white workers. Hoovervilles with higher populations of color were more likely to be targeted by the police, and people of color were less likely to receive loans or rent forgiveness. Although the "official end" to the Depression was in 1939, communities of color, who had been hit the hardest, took longer to recover.

This is the world that Claudia and Frieda's Mama and Daddy have been navigating for twelve years by the time the play begins. This is why they are so concerned with pinching pennies and keeping the heat indoors. For twelve long years, they have lived with the exhaustion of not knowing when the paychecks would stop. They have dealt with food instability and the ever-present threat of homelessness, all while raising two young girls. Can the audience blame them for lecturing Claudia and Frieda about what each season means for the house? After all, they survived a massive, all-encompassing trauma and came out on the other side with a modest home and a family they love and protect. ♦

ENTERTAINMENT DURING THE 1930s AND 1940s

Although the Great Depression put a massive amount of stress on the American public at large, the 1930s and 1940s were a massively profitable period for entertainment. The more people struggled personally and financially, the more they longed for an escape from reality. The characters in *The Bluest Eye* also use myriad forms of entertainment to make life a little bit brighter. From Mrs. Breedlove's affection for the movies to Pecola's obsession with Shirley Temple to Claudia and Frieda's frequent attempts to stave off boredom with fortune-telling, the Bible, and pornographic magazines, the characters constantly seek diversions and pop culture to both provide levity and escape, as well as to form their worldviews and self-image.

In the 1930s, movies with synchronized picture and sound ("talkies") were still a novelty, and going to the movies became more popular than ever before. Films like *The Wizard of Oz*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Bringing Up Baby*, and *King Kong* were viewed at the theaters en masse and movie stars like Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn became instantly recognizable around the country. During the 1940s, cinema continued to progress as an art form, with the release of such iconic movies as *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, and *Arsenic and Old Lace* and the industry producing more and more films every year.

Shirley Temple was a child movie star who rose to massive popularity during the 1930s due to her lively personality and iconic blonde curls. Her optimistic films raised spirits during the Depression and brought moviegoers out in droves, ensuring a spot for her on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and in the hearts of millions of Americans.

Many new games and contests were invented in the 1930s and 40s. Monopoly was first introduced in 1935, encouraging players to build wealth and expand their properties, which may strike some as ironic given the financial climate of the time. Pinball machines were also introduced in the 1930s, as were marathon dancing contests and Scrabble.

Baseball, America's national pastime, was the most popular sport in the 1930s, though the country's financial struggle made it difficult to fill stadiums. Many players had to take on other jobs in order to make ends meet. Boxing and college football also became more popular during this time, although neither reached their zenith until the end of the 1940s. Despite an inability to attend sporting events, fans could now tune into radio broadcasts of games and matches, keeping the industry alive. Since people had little money but a lot of time, recreational sports also became more prominent. This love of professional and recreational sports continued into the 1940s and beyond.

With the popularity of the radio came many celebrity musicians. Big band and swing music were especially popular in the 30s and 40s. Musicians like Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Bing Crosby, Cab Calloway, Mae West, Fred Astaire, and Duke Ellington made names for themselves during this time, with many even crossing over into movie stardom. ♦

Shirley Temple in a photo published in Italy by an unknown photographer. 1934.

Publicity photo of Ella Fitzgerald by Lewin/Kaufman/Schwartz, Public Relations, Beverly Hills. 1962.

Lobby card from the original release of *The Wizard of Oz*. 1939.

THE JIM CROW ERA

Written by Rachael McNamara, edited by Kale Hinthorn

On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued an Emancipation Proclamation to free all enslaved people in both the Union and the seceded Confederate states. However, the Confederacy did not recognize Abraham Lincoln as their president, and therefore did not adhere to his proclamation. Once the Civil War ended in 1865, the former Confederate states rejoined the Union and recognized the Emancipation Proclamation as legitimate. It was then that slavery officially ended in the United States.

At the bus station in Durham, North Carolina by Jack Delano. 1940.

The Emancipation Proclamation was only the beginning, however. Since white Americans were loath to share the privileges they had always enjoyed, new extremely restrictive and racially biased laws began to emerge throughout the United States during the Reconstruction period following the war.. These laws, known as Jim Crow laws, targeted the rights of Black Americans. Even their name has roots in racism, as "Jim Crow" was the name of a minstrel show which featured a character in blackface.

These laws began as strict statutes detailing when, where, and how freed slaves could work and how much they could be compensated. They also controlled how Black citizens could own property and travel. Essentially, these laws served as legal loopholes through which the Southern states could force Black citizens into indentured servitude.

Over time, these laws evolved. In the 1896 case of Plessy v. Ferguson, the United States Supreme Court confirmed that racial segregation was constitutional under the "separate but equal" doctrine. This ruling ensured the survival and prevalence of Jim Crow laws throughout the next half-century and beyond.

After this ruling in the South, lawmakers began to draw physical lines through public spaces indicating where people of color could and could not go. Signs reading "Whites Only" hung outside stores and restaurants. Northern states, on the surface, were seen as more tolerant and accepting of Black Americans; however, they were not immune to these racist laws. While there were no physical lines drawn through public spaces in the Northern states, restrictive housing laws perpetuated segregation by limiting where Black families could live. Northern states also began to disproportionately enforce laws against loitering and disorderly conduct in Black communities. Many Northern states also began to alter what was considered to be public space. Wealthy, white individuals began to buy what were once public parks and beaches, limiting who could access these spaces.

Jim Crow laws continued to maintain racial segregation and target the rights of Black Americans for nearly one hundred years. It was not until the Voting Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in any public space, that Jim Crow laws were abolished. By that point, however, racism was so ingrained in American systems and practices that the country still struggles to recognize and remove it today. *The Bluest Eye* takes place during the Jim Crow era and although each character has a different relationship to race, there's no question that systemic racism and America's cycles of discrimination shape the very fabric of Morrison's story. ♦

THE INJUSTICE SYSTEM: **THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF *THE BLUEST EYE***

Written by Rachael McNamara, edited by Kale Hinthorn

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* takes place 82 years ago, during an era in which Jim Crow laws blatantly restricted the rights of Black American citizens across the country. The effects of these laws are felt throughout the play, though not explicitly named. Pecola is ignored and ridiculed by the people she meets because she is a young Black girl. She is systemically conditioned to believe that she is a problem, and that if she were only white, she would be beautiful and worthy of love. Her parents experience similar struggles, with her father even attempting to burn down the family house as a result of his past trauma.

Minneapolis, Minnesota by Fibonacci Blue. 2013.

It should be noted that Cholly's actions in the play, especially against Pecola, cannot be justified. A person's past experiences with violence or abuse are not excuses to harm others in the present. Having said that, it is worth looking at the system that fostered Cholly's tortured personality and it is worth acknowledging that his experience with racism played a part in shaping the man he eventually becomes. Moreover, this background lends insight as to why *The Bluest Eye* remains relevant: because regardless of how far we've come as a nation, racism is built into the very foundation of American society.

The disparities the Black characters in *The Bluest Eye* face are rooted in oppressive legal and social systems that date back to the beginnings of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (circa 1619), the legacies of which continue to disproportionately target Black Americans today. In 1896, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that it is constitutional to enforce and maintain racially segregated, "separate but equal" spaces, it inherently legally justified racially discriminatory behavior and policy. The discriminatory behavior that the Supreme Court's 1896 decision validated became alarmingly normal and widespread throughout the country and went legally unquestioned for the next half-century.

While considerable progress has since been made in American society in regard to reforming long-standing and deeply rooted racially discriminatory laws and behavior, racial inequity is still widespread in contemporary society. Outright acts of discrimination are no longer justifiable by written law and are, in some respects, less tolerated; however, racial discrimination remains prevalent on a systemic level. The system that plays perhaps the largest role in the perpetuation of racial inequality in this country is the justice system.

The United States' criminal justice system is the largest in the world. In 2015, 2.2 million individuals were incarcerated in federal, state, or local prisons and jails, accounting for nearly 22% of all prisoners in the world. Within the United States' massive correctional and criminal justice system, there is significant racial disparity. For example, Black Americans are more likely than white Americans to be arrested. Once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted. Once convicted, they are more likely to receive lengthy prison sentences. In fact, Black American adults are nearly six times as likely to be incarcerated than white adults.

This disparity has its roots, in part, in how the criminal justice system is structured to favor those

THE INJUSTICE SYSTEM CONTINUED...

with great financial means over people of lower socio-economic status. In his book *No Equal Justice*, former Georgetown Law Professor David Cole states:

> "These double standards are not, of course, explicit; on the face of it, the criminal law is color-blind and class-blind. But in a sense, this only makes the problem worse. The rhetoric of the criminal justice system sends the message that our society carefully protects everyone's constitutional rights, but in practice the rules assure that law enforcement prerogatives will generally prevail over the rights of minorities and the poor. By affording criminal suspects substantial constitutional rights in theory, the Supreme Court validates the results of the criminal justice system as fair. That formal fairness obscures the systemic concerns that ought to be raised by the fact that the prison population is overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately Black."

One of the ways the justice system targeted Black Americans post-Civil War was in the establishment of vagrancy laws. Vagrancy laws criminalized unemployment, homelessness, poverty, loitering (being in a public place without a distinct purpose), and suspicious activity. The breadth and vagueness of these laws essentially allowed law enforcement officers to target anyone who might appear "out of place." In this regard, vagrancy laws served as ubiquitous tools for maintaining a class-and race-based hierarchy in American society. The vagueness of these laws also allowed for the enforcement and their application to adapt to any new perceived threats to the social fabric at different times and in different places.

While vagrancy laws were deemed unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972, they too have been redesigned in the years since the SCOTUS ruling. Today, we see the legacy of vagrancy laws at play in profiling practices, traffic stops, and 911 calls about suspicious behavior—all of which disproportionately target Black Americans. Viewing the justice system through this critical lens, it becomes clear that our current justice system is steeped in practices and policies that mirror those of the Jim Crow era—practices and policies that inherently target and limit Black citizens' rights. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, articulates the archaic roots of the contemporary U.S. legal system's practice of incarceration of Black Americans on a mass scale:

> "As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it." ♦

Edited from:

"Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System." The Sentencing Project, www.sentencingproject.org/ publications/un-report-on-racialdisparities, and

https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-259

THEMES

Whiteness as the Standard of Beauty

> "Truth be told, what I felt for Shirley Temple was unsullied hatred. Mr. Jangles wasn't supposed to be dancing with that white girl. He was my friend, my uncle, my daddy. He should have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. At least with someone who looked like me" (Act I, scene v).

The crux of *The Bluest Eye*, and indeed the concept that initially sparked the story in Morrison's mind, is the idea of a little Black girl who desperately wishes to have blue eyes. Morrison herself spent her life immersed in a culture which glorifies whiteness and vilifies Blackness, a dynamic that is reflected in her novels. Pecola idolizes Shirley Temple partially for her media contributions, but mostly because Pecola believes that if she looked like Shirley Temple, people would look at her instead of through her. When the audience meets Pecola for the first time, she says,

> "Every night I pray for God to deliver me blue eyes. I have prayed now going on a year, but I have hope still. I figure God is very busy, and I am very small. [...] And people would have to be nice and the teachers would see me, they would really look at me in my eyes and say, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes. Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. I would be very happy, like Jane, and Shirley and the candy girl" (Act I, scene iii).

Because so many people have ignored Pecola, she has internalized the idea that she is wrong for the way that she looks, and if she could only change her eye color, she would be deserving of the love she so desperately craves. Maureen hammers this belief home when she insults Pecola, saying, "I am cute. And you are ugly. All of you are ugly ugly black-eee-mos. I am cute" (Act II, scene i). With a few short sentences, Maureen confirms that she equates Blackness to ugliness, and that she fundamentally believes that Black girls can never be as beautiful as white girls.

Maureen's ideas are supported by popular belief. Morrison emphasizes that the world has told the Black characters "'You are ugly people.' It was a truth supported by every billboard, every movie, every glance" (Act I, scene iv). As a result, the characters, namely the Breedloves, carry themselves as if they are not worth the space they take up. Claudia and Frieda find this behavior odd, as they have not yet internalized the narrative that the world is telling them.

Claudia, in fact, pushes back against this belief. She refuses to be corrupted by the idea that whiteness is the peak of beauty, going so far as to mutilate her white dolls out of anger. She explains, "If I could rip it apart, maybe I'd understand what the world thought was so wonderful about pink skin and yellow hair" (Act I, scene v). Although this may seem violent, Claudia is simply reacting to the verbal and physical violence she receives from the rest of the world for being Black. She is angry that her face is not good enough in the eyes of society, and she is too young to enact change in the public world, so she venerates her Black dolls and desecrates her white ones, desperately reversing the status quo in her pretend world. Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison illuminates racist beauty standards as a societal shortcoming, and invites audiences to examine their own views of beauty. When you think of someone beautiful, who do you picture? What kinds of features do they have? Have your own views of beauty been impacted by the biases of a systemically racist society? And what can you do to unlearn that?

Entertainment as Escapism

> "Mrs. Breedlove found some comfort and company in the cinema" (Act I, scene vi).

Characters throughout *The Bluest Eye*, especially the Breedloves, consistently make references to film and television, immersing themselves in the world of entertainment to escape from the trials they face on a day-to-day basis. Like many in the Great Depression, and indeed like many today, the characters daydream about the people onscreen, wishing they could live those lives instead. Anyone who has ever obsessed over a character or an actor can on some level relate to Pecola's love of Shirley Temple. Pecola desperately longs to be like Shirley Temple, and when asked why she loves the star so much she replies, "She's pretty and talented and people love her" (Act I, scene iii). Pecola uses Shirley Temple as a paragon of everything she wants out of life, and pours more of her energy into obsessing over Shirley than into processing the hand fate has dealt her. These escapist tendencies, however, are

THEMES CONTINUED...

not unique to Pecola. Her mother also finds solace in the silver screen.

Mrs. Breedlove lives a difficult life. She uses films to distract from her challenging reality and as a basis for her daydreams. In Act I, Mrs. Breedlove says,

> "The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. They'd cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures. Gave me a lot of pleasure. But it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly even harder" (Act I, scene vi).

Even though it makes her reality harder to bear, Mrs. Breedlove cannot help but find joy in watching films.

When times get difficult and money gets tight, the first programs in schools and institutions to get cut are usually arts programs. And yet what gets people through hard times if not art? The entertainment industry saved people's lives during the Depression, because it offered both comfort and legitimate job opportunities. Perhaps Mrs. Breedlove's desire to become like the movie stars she watches is unhealthy and motivated in large part by racist beauty standards—but if it gives Mrs. Breedlove some relief from her painful reality, can an audience blame her for trying to escape? How many of us have avoided an obligation or difficult conversation by binging a Netflix show or scrolling through TikTok? Entertainment comforts Morrison's characters just like it comforts the people of today.

Womanhood and Femininity

> "She, in turn, fought back in a purely feminine way—with frying pans and pokers, and occasionally a flat iron would sail toward his head." (Act I, scene iv).

The women and girls in *The Bluest Eye* not only suffer the racial oppression of the white-dominated world around them, but are also thwarted by sexism enacted by the men in their personal lives. When learning about discrimination, it is vital to keep intersectionality in mind. People at the intersections of multiple minority groups are almost always targets of disproportionate amounts of violence. This is certainly the case when considering Black women in the world today, and in Morrison's story. Black women deal with both racial and gender discrimination on a daily basis, and urthermore, are asked by white women to prioritize feminism and asked by Black men to prioritize antiracism. All of these pressures create a unique experience of discrimination that shapes their identities as Black people and as women.

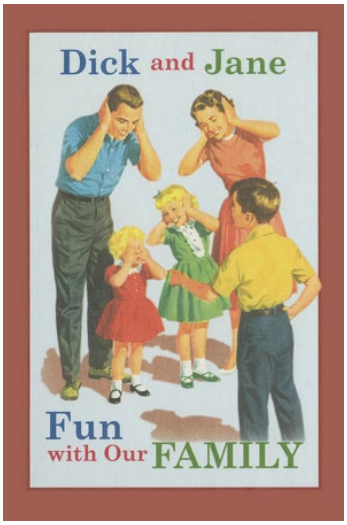
In *The Bluest Eye*, the younger girls have a naive and optimistic view of womanhood. They believe womanhood means having babies and being loved by a man. The older women, such as Mrs. Breedlove, understand womanhood as a desperate struggle to escape violence at the hands of the men in their lives. Only through beauty and sexuality can women in *The Bluest Eye* hope to regain some of the power exerted over them by men. When Pecola first has her period, the girls are both excited and scared, with Claudia saying, "It was at this moment that Pecola's world changed. The moment had only a peripheral effect on us, but Pecola's world would be forever altered. In that moment she was made more vulnerable than we could even imagine" (Act I, scene vii). This moment signifies the beginning of the end for Pecola. As a result of growing up, something over which she has absolutely no control, Pecola is marked as a target for sexual violence and unwanted pregnancy. Her times of innocence are over and her times of struggle are just beginning. Fundamentally, being a woman in *The Bluest Eye* means fighting for oneself and one's family through a sea of prejudice and sexual violence. Still, through it all, Claudia and Frieda are paragons of hope and optimism, and the women in the story never stop fighting tooth and nail for womanhood to mean something more than being a victim. Through their determination, they define womanhood as a fight rather than a defeat, a brave effort towards a brighter future. ♦

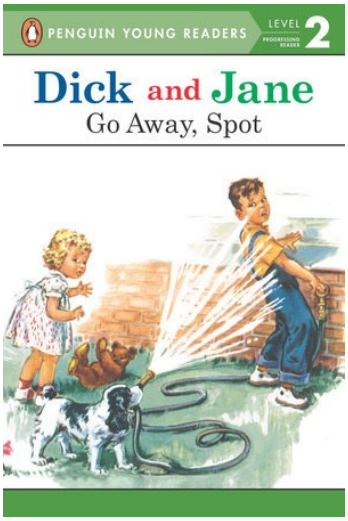
MOTIFS IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

Motifs are defined as "a distinctive feature or dominant idea in an artistic or literary composition" (dictionary.com) and recur throughout the story to introduce or emphasize a theme or mood. Morrison's works are known for their exquisite use of motif, and Lydia R. Diamond's stage adaptation of Morrison's novel utilizes them for the stage.

The "Dick and Jane" Narrative

Throughout the play, Pecola and her family reference a story about Dick and Jane, an idealized children's story about a perfect family whose members love each other. The *Dick and Jane* books are real books which contain deliberately simple stories to help young children learn to read. The series includes such titles as *Dick and Jane: Fun with Our Family*, *Dick and Jane: Go Away, Spot*, *Dick and Jane: We Play Pretend*, and *Dick and Jane: Jump and Run*. In *The Bluest Eye*, the "Dick and Jane" narrative is distorted by multiple narrators and interrupted by moments of trauma and confusion, highlighting just how different Pecola's reality is from the ideal seen in the stories she reads. The play makes Dick and Jane's world seem robotic and unsettling, juxtaposing it with the messier but more real world of the characters and stressing to the audience that although Pecola longs for their normalcy, Dick and Jane cannot be ideals toward which to strive.





Covers of modern editions of *Dick and Jane. Fun with Our Family* Grosset & Dunlap 2004, *Go Away, Spot* by Penguin Young Readers. 2003.

The Seasons and Nature

The Bluest Eye relies heavily on descriptions of the seasons to mark the passage of time and yet brilliantly subverts the audience's expectations of those seasons. During autumn, the season of harvest and celebration, Pecola's house burns down and then the next fall, her baby dies. In the spring, the season of purity and new hope, Pecola is raped. The winter, the season of stagnation and hibernation, brings with it an exciting and daunting new challenge in the form of Maureen Peal. In the summer, the season of play and warmth, Claudia and Frieda think of violent storms and planting seeds. This discord between the visceral associations of the seasons and the events the seasons actually bring make the audience aware of the imbalance in the characters' worlds. Their community is so broken that even the Earth seems to mock them.

Blue Eyes

The motif of the blue eyes serves chiefly as a reminder of the beauty standards that Pecola feels she can never achieve because of her Blackness and the oppressive white gaze. Over and over Pecola states that if only she had blue eyes, the world would be kind and fair to her. This repetition is bound to stick with the audience and force them to remember why this sweet girl is wishing so deeply to change who she is. In the end, she receives her blue eyes, but only she can see them. The blue eyes are at the very center of the story, as they reflect the injustice of a culture which could convince someone so young and innocent that because of how she looks, she does not deserve love and attention. ♦

PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **RESEARCH**

Purpose:
These research prompts will help students develop an understanding of the social and historical contexts of *The Bluest Eye.*

Prepare:
Students will divide into small groups and each group will research one of the following topics related to *The Bluest Eye.* Once all groups have prepared their research, they will present their findings to one another.

Toni Morrison

- Her life
- Her most famous works
  - *Beloved*
  - *Song of Solomon*
  - *Home*
- Adaptations of her works
- Medals and Awards

The 1930s and 1940s

- The Great Depression
  - Hoovervilles
  - Bank Failure
  - Unemployment
  - The Dust Bowl
- Entertainment
  - Shirley Temple
  - Music
  - Film
  - Radio
- Politics
- Life in Ohio

Racial Discrimination in the 1940s

- Jim Crow Laws
- Criminal Justice System
- Employment Discrimination
- Racially Motivated Hate Crimes
- Whiteness as a Beauty Standard

PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES**

Purpose:
These activities will prompt students to think critically about the themes and ideas in *The Bluest Eye* and engage with the narrative.

The Essentials

In this activity, students will engage with the plot and themes of *The Bluest Eye* by breaking it down into its most essential parts.

1. Start by breaking students off into groups and assign each group an act of the play.
2. Ask each group to condense the events of their act into one paragraph. Then have a representative
3. from each group read their paragraph aloud.
4. Re-form the groups and have each group summarize their act in one sentence. Again, have a representative from each group read the sentence aloud.
5. Have the groups come together one last time and encapsulate their act in just one word. Have a representative from each group share their words aloud.
6. Ask the students if the entire play can be summarized in one sentence. In one word?
7. Facilitate a discussion on what this activity reveals about the plot and the themes of the play.

Alternate Ending

In this activity, students will use their analytic skills to engage with the text of *The Bluest Eye* by writing an alternate ending.

1. Have students read/perform *The Bluest Eye* as a class.
2. Discuss the meaning of the ending of the play.
3. Break students into groups and have them create an alternate ending for the play.
4. Come back together. Groups will present the alternate endings they devised.
5. Discuss the different endings.
    a. Which ending seemed realistic? Why?
    b. Which endings were most surprising? Why?
    c. What would be different about the meaning of the play if the ending was different?

PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES** CONTINUED...

The American Dream:

In this activity, students will have the opportunity to create their own, personal definitions of the American Dream through the exploration of images and text associated with the concept.

1. Facilitate a class-wide discussion about the definition of the American Dream.
2. In the discussion, ask students to list words that they associate with the American Dream. Write those words up on the board.
3. After the discussion, ask students to write out their own, personal definition of the American Dream.
4. Instruct students to use the definition they have written as the basis for a visual collage of images and phrases that they believe encapsulate their idea of the American Dream.
5. Have students research and print or draw images, phrases, and quotations that align with their idea of the American Dream and assemble their drawings and quotations into a single collage that includes their written definition of the American Dream.
6. Allow students to present their collages and definitions to the class.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. How do the four seasons affect the characters in *The Bluest Eye*? In what ways does the story follow typical expectations for each of the seasons? In what ways does it differ?

2. Compare and contrast Claudia and Pecola's views of whiteness and Blackness. How do these views affect the girls? How do their views exemplify or defy the social norms of the time? Use evidence from the play to support your claims.

3. What role does gender play in *The Bluest Eye*? What might Morrison be conveying through her wide-ranging portrayals of women?

4. What is the purpose of Soaphead Church in the play? Do you think he is the occultist he claims to be, or is he a fraud?

5. How does Morrison present intimacy in the play? Discuss the moments of positive and negative intimacy and what they signify.

ADDITIONAL **RESOURCES**

BOOKS:

Bloom, Harold. *Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye*. Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2007.

Hatch, Kristen. *Shirley Temple and the Performance of Girlhood*. Rutgers Univ. Press, 2015.

Lenthall, Bruce. *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226471938.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage International. Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc., 2019.

ARTICLES:

Klotman, Phyllis R. "Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in the Bluest Eye." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1979, pp. 123–25. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3041475. Accessed 25 May 2023.

Moses, Cat. "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye." *African American Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1999, pp. 623–37. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2901343. Accessed 10 May 2023.

Morrison, Toni, and Nellie McKay. "An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1983, pp. 413–29. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/1208128. Accessed 12 May 2023.

Roye, Susmita. "TONI MORRISON'S DISRUPTED GIRLS AND THEIR DISTURBED GIRLHOODS: 'The Bluest Eye' and 'A Mercy.'" *Callaloo*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2012, pp. 212–27. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505. Accessed 1 May 2023.

FILMS:

Demme, Johnathan, director. *Beloved*. Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1998.

Greenfield-Sanders, Timothy, director. *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*. Magnolia Pictures, 2019.

ONLINE RESOURCES:

Meisenhelter, Jesse. "How 1930s Discrimination Shaped Inequality in Today's Cities " NCRC." *National Community Reinvestment Coalition*, 23 Sept. 2021, ncrc.org/how-1930s-discrimination-shaped-inequality-in-todays-cities/.

Miller, Laura. "Toni Morrison Reshaped the Landscape of Literature." *Slate Magazine*, 6 Aug. 2019, slate.com/culture/2019/08/toni-morrison-american-literature-faulkner-style.html.

ABOUT THEATRE ARTS: **KEY THEATRICAL TERMS**

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of amusement: going to the theatre. But attending a live theatrical performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of entertainment.

In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like A Noise Within, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd.

After this A Noise Within performance, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

blocking: The instructions a director gives actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce, or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. A Noise Within features a thrust stage.

ABOUT **A NOISE WITHIN**

A NOISE WITHIN produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.

Study Guides

A Noise Within creates study guides in alignment with core reading, listening, speaking, and performing arts standards to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study guides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: www.anoisewithin.org. The information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with the California VAPA standards, the Common Core, and 21st Century Learning Skills.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of A Noise Within's artistic interpretation of the work, statements from directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website.

Credits

Alicia Green . . . . . Education Director and Editor

Kale Hinthorn . . . . . Author

Emma Baker . . . . . LACAC Education Intern

Dr. Miranda Johnson-Haddad . . . . . Editorial Consultant

Craig Schwartz. . . . . Production Photography

Teresa English . . . . . Graphic Design

aNoiseWithin
Classic Theatre, Modern Magic

Geoff Elliott & Julia Rodriguez-Elliott
Producing Artistic Directors

ADDRESS 3352 E Foothill Blvd
Pasadena, CA 91107

TEL 626.356.3100

FAX 626.356.3120

EMAIL info@anoisewithin.org

WEB anoisewithin.org