

E-Content

American Literature

Semester: III

Lecture 28

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**GALGOTIAS
UNIVERSITY**

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COURSE CONTENT UNIT-V

Lecture 28: Toni Morrison: The Bluest Eye:

Themes

Whiteness as the Standard of Beauty

- *The Bluest Eye* provides an extended depiction of the ways in which internalized white beauty standards deform the lives of black girls and women.
- Implicit messages that whiteness is superior are everywhere, including the white baby doll given to Claudia, the idealization of Shirley Temple, the consensus that light-skinned
- Maureen is cuter than the other black girls, the idealization of white beauty in the movies, and Pauline Breedlove's preference for the little white girl she works for over her daughter.
- Adult women, having learned to hate the blackness of their own bodies, take this hatred out on their children—Mrs. Breedlove shares the conviction that Pecola is ugly, and lighter-skinned Geraldine curses Pecola's blackness.

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- Claudia remains free from this worship of whiteness, imagining Pecola's unborn baby as beautiful in its blackness. But it is hinted that once Claudia reaches adolescence, she too will learn to hate herself, as if racial self-loathing were a necessary part of maturation.
- The person who suffers most from white beauty standards is, of course, Pecola. She connects beauty with being loved and believes that if she possesses blue eyes, the cruelty in her life will be replaced by affection and respect.
- This hopeless desire leads ultimately to madness, suggesting that the fulfillment of the wish for white beauty may be even more tragic than the wish impulse itself.

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Internalized racism

The novel suggests that physical beauty is a virtue embedded in society. The novel reveals the belief that the outside of people ultimately reflects their character and personality. This belief compromises people's judgement and they act upon internal bias. These biases are displayed throughout the novel, especially through the mistreatment of Pecola by family, friends and community

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Religion

Pecola's suffering stems from her attempts to rationalize her misfortune with the notion of an omnipotent God. Much of Pecola's story suggests the insufficiency of Christian beliefs for minorities who exist in a predominantly white society. This ideology damages Pecola and her mother, Pauline, who fully accepts Christianity and spends her time caring for a white family as opposed to her own. Alexander suggests that the image of a more human God represents a traditional African view of deities, better suiting the lives of the African-American characters.

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Shame

The Bluest Eye is a "shame drama and trauma narrative," that uses Pecola and its other characters to examine how people respond to shame.

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Seeing versus Being Seen

- Pecola's desire for blue eyes, while highly unrealistic, is based on one correct insight into her world: she believes that the cruelty she witnesses and experiences is connected to how she is seen. If she had beautiful blue eyes, Pecola imagines, people would not want to do ugly things in front of her or to her.
- The accuracy of this insight is affirmed by her experience of being teased by the boys—when Maureen comes to her rescue, it seems that they no longer want to behave badly under Maureen's attractive gaze.

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- In a more basic sense, Pecola and her family are mistreated in part because they happen to have black skin. By wishing for blue eyes rather than lighter skin, Pecola indicates that she wishes to see things differently as much as she wishes to be seen differently.
- She can only receive this wish, in effect, by blinding herself. Pecola is then able to see herself as beautiful, but only at the cost of her ability to see accurately both herself and the world around her.
- The connection between how one is seen and what one sees has a uniquely tragic outcome for her.

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Sexual Initiation and Abuse

- To a large degree, *The Bluest Eye* is about both the pleasures and the perils of sexual initiation. Early in the novel, Pecola has her first menstrual period, and toward the novel's end she has her first sexual experience, which is violent.
- Frieda knows about and anticipates menstruating, and she is initiated into sexual experience when she is fondled by Henry Washington. We are told the story of Cholly's first sexual experience, which ends when two white men force him to finish having sex while they watch.
- The fact that all of these experiences are humiliating and hurtful indicates that sexual coming-of-age is fraught with peril, especially in an abusive environment.

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- In the novel, parents carry much of the blame for their children's often traumatic sexual coming-of-age. The most blatant case is Cholly's rape of his own daughter, Pecola, which is, in a sense, a repetition of the sexual humiliation Cholly experienced under the gaze of two racist whites.
- Frieda's experience is less painful than Pecola's because her parents immediately come to her rescue, playing the appropriate protector and underlining, by way of contrast, the extent of Cholly's crime against his daughter.

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- But Frieda is not given information that lets her understand what has happened to her. Instead, she lives with a vague fear of being “ruined” like the local prostitutes.
- The prevalence of sexual violence in the novel suggests that racism is not the only thing that distorts black girlhoods. There is also a pervasive assumption that women’s bodies are available for abuse.
- The refusal on the part of parents to teach their girls about sexuality makes the girls’ transition into sexual maturity difficult.

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IMPORTANT SYMBOLS IN THE NOVELS

The House

The novel begins with a sentence from a Dick-and-Jane narrative: “Here is the house.” Homes not only indicate socioeconomic status in this novel, but they also symbolize the emotional situations and values of the characters who inhabit them. The Breedlove apartment is miserable and decrepit, suffering from Mrs. Breedlove’s preference for her employer’s home over her own and symbolizing the misery of the Breedlove family. The MacTeer house is drafty and dark, but it is carefully tended by Mrs. MacTeer and, according to Claudia, filled with love, symbolizing that family’s comparative cohesion.

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Bluest Eye(s)

To Pecola, blue eyes symbolize the beauty and happiness that she associates with the white, middle-class world. They also come to symbolize her own blindness, for she gains blue eyes only at the cost of her sanity. The “bluest” eye could also mean the saddest eye.

Furthermore, *eye* puns on *I*, in the sense that the novel’s title uses the singular form of the noun (instead of *The Bluest Eyes*) to express many of the characters’ sad isolation.

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The Marigolds

Claudia and Frieda associate marigolds with the safety and well-being of Pecola's baby. Their ceremonial offering of money and the remaining unsold marigold seeds represents an honest sacrifice on their part. They believe that if the marigolds they have planted grow, then Pecola's baby will be all right. More generally, marigolds represent the constant renewal of nature. In Pecola's case, this cycle of renewal is perverted by her father's rape of her.

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<https://blindhypnosis.com/the-bluest-eye-pdf-toni-morrison-book.html>

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