

First Opinion: White Symbols of Hope or Threats to Black Youth's Self-Perception

Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. New York City, NY: Vintage Books, 2007. Print.

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The Bluest Eye is set in the 1940s following the Great Depression and captures the raw experiences of African American characters (past and present) in the midwestern and southern regions during the 20th century. *Depression* is undoubtedly an emotion that is embodied through the realistic and riveting narratives of the key characters depicted by award winning author, Toni Morrison; in addition to such emotions of hope, struggle/challenge, pride, and shame. By way of a symbolic journey through the four seasons of autumn, winter, spring, and summer, readers are captivated by the evolution and encounters of each integral character. Through Morrison's excellent use of figurative language and striking imagery, this story grasps readers' attention, and emotions. In addition, the realistic colloquialisms, mannerisms, and dialects of African Americans through dialogue and strong narration create a sense of warmth to Black readers.

The Bluest Eye addresses many societal issues including poverty and classism, racism (including instances of prejudice and colorism), abuse (domestic violence, physical, emotional,

bullying, and sexual), abandonment, emasculation, resentment, self-identity/esteem issues, and more. The role and impact of the media on self-perception is a challenge that the characters are grossly influenced by in the novel. Like modern times, Whiteness jades the young, African American character's view of themselves, their family, and their worlds. While the characters Freida (age 10) and Pecola (age 11) admired attributes of Whiteness and had desire to have White characteristics such as lighter skin tones, straighter/blonder hair texture/color and blue eyes. The narrator, Claudia (age 9), resists these sentiments and valued her Blackness:

"I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley [Temple]. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels. So I said, "I like Jane Withers" (19).

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson who was noted as the most famous of all African American tap dancers in the twentieth century for his blackface performances in entertainment in the early 1900s, including his role with famous White child character, Shirley Temple in "The Little Colonel," (Butler, 1935). Black face is a style of entertainment where actors cover their faces in black makeup and is based upon racist black stereotypes about African Americans. Padgett notes that African American writer Donald Bogle called him [Bojangles] "the quintessential Tom" because of his cheerful and shameless subservience to whites in film.

As you can see Claudia resents Freida and Pecola's admiration and praise of the White Shirley Temple character as she felt that she (a black girl) should instead be who Bojangles was onstage and interacting with. She resisted this media representation as a personal goal silently in her thoughts but, instead (to fit in with her peers) stated aloud that she liked Jane Withers,

(another famous White child actress during this time period). These internal conflicts are a theme throughout the story. For example, she thinks to herself,

“Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured

(20). Later she mocks how adults scold her for her treatment of her White doll babies:

“Grown people frowned and fussed: “You-don ’t-know-how-to-take-care-of-nothing.

I-never-had-a-baby-doll-in-my-whole-life-and-used-to-cry-my-eyes-out-for-them.

Now-you-got-one-a-beautiful-one-and-you-tear-it-upwhat ’s-the-matter-with-you?” (21).

Claudia had a deep animosity toward her White dolls and discussed how she dismembered them purposely in the story. This deep animosity she reveals that she also possesses toward little White girls (22).

She questions, “What made people look at them [little white girls] and say, “Awwwww,” but not for me?” (22).

She expresses how she felt shame for having these feelings. The way she masked these emotions was through what she depicts as “fraudulent love.” This meant openly in front of peers she learned how to fake admire White dolls and actors such as Shirley Temple through fake worship.

Claudia never got to fully understand the true gruesome home life and overall experiences in the world that her friend, Pecola had to unfortunately live day in and out. Pecola and her brother often witness domestic violence occur between their parents, and she is mistreated by classmates and individuals in the community because of her appearance, which others depict as ugly, dark-skinned, and dirty. Last, and quite tragic, she is raped and impregnated by her very own father. This is a pain that no child should ever have to experience.

In an attempt to escape her dark reality throughout the story she longs to have blue eyes, as she feels that blue eyes are the key to not only change how she sees the world, but how others see her.

“Each night, without fail, she [Pecola] prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time” (46).

According to The American Experience article, *The Bluest Eye* has landed on the American Library Association’s list of most challenged books for reasons including, “sexually explicit material,” “lots of graphic descriptions and lots of disturbing language,” and “an underlying socialist-communist agenda.” Despite these I would recommend this book for African American students and young adults in advanced high school literature or college courses. As a Black woman, the issues that arise in this novel, though some harsh, do indeed relate to some of my own and family experiences, as to other Black youth and young adults. I hesitate to recommend this book to predominantly White school contexts if the educators are not adequately prepared or properly trained to facilitate the necessary discussions and lessons. Because of the racial slurs and depictions as well as the sexually explicit content it is imperative any educator (regardless of their own or students’ races or ethnicities) that plans to implement this book do so in a cautious and just way. Implementation should not be careless and unthoughtful due to the sensitivity of the issues that arise.

The American Experience (2017) includes an interview from a distinguished educator Silveri (2017) that is a supporter of this novel in the classroom. She notes,

“When I teach these things, I never say, “open your books and turn to chapter one.” I show students the doll test, where the psychologist has the children pick the doll and say

which one is ugly, which one is pretty, which one is bad. So, we look at the world first, and then say, “Oh by the way, this is what Toni Morrison has to say about it.”

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, though challenging, is such a rich and necessary text. There are so many intersections that can be analyzed and discussed from an economic, historical, geographical, metaphorical, cultural, racial, social, emotional, and many more lenses. Again, this novel provides Black students with the opportunity to see themselves represented, as well as critically engage and analyze with not only a well-written text, but with issues and topics related to their very own lives and experiences. Silveri (2017) elaborates on this in sharing,

“Teaching novels like *The Bluest Eye* helps us break down barriers with students...

Books allow us to help them heal in ways that we as educators couldn’t help them heal on our own.” (page number)

Works Cited

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About the Author

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