

Candace Cardwell
Rationale for YA Text

Bibliographic Citation:

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970.
(The edition that I currently use is the First Vintage International Edition, May 2007)

Intended Audience:

The Bluest Eye is used in the 8th grade English class at The Children's Storefront School. Our novel study is done with the entire mixed ability group, and much of the reading is completed in class-thereby offering students the opportunity to improve their reading fluency. Students also complete several small group projects focusing on the language and themes of the novel. There are also individual projects that require students to complete research, and/or memorize and recite parts of the text. Our study of *The Bluest Eye* is important for the following reasons:

- 1) Students learn about the impact of history, culture, and geography on a text.
- 2) Students learn about perspective and audience.
- 3) Students are exposed to different types of plot structure and narrative voice.
- 4) Students deepen their understanding of figurative language. They analyze metaphors and similes and learn to recognize foreshadowing.
- 5) Students strengthen their ability to recognize and interpret historical and literary allusions-beginning with an in-depth study of W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of Double Consciousness.
- 6) Students are encouraged to use their reading of the text to examine their own ideas about race, color, gender, self-esteem, beauty, and love.

Summary:

Set in Loraine Ohio, in the years following the Great Depression, *The Bluest Eye* is the story of Pecola Breedlove, her family, and the community that surrounds her. At the beginning of the novel it is revealed that Pecola has been raped by her father and impregnated. The baby dies and the narrative takes the reader on a journey to discover how this tragedy occurred. The story is narrated by Claudia and an omniscient narrator. We learn that Pecola comes to live with Claudia and her sister Frieda for a short time after her father burns down her house. Pecola is convinced of her own ugliness and fascinated with Shirley Temple and Mary Jane candy, as a result. She comes to desire blue eyes because she believes that her family and her peers won't mistreat her if she is attractive. Later in the novel, we also hear the voices of Pecola's parents, Mrs. Breedlove and Cholly. We learn about their journey from the South, and how their feelings about themselves caused them to fall out of love with each other and led to the neglect and abuse of their children.

Relationship of Book to the Curriculum:

Our study of *The Bluest Eye* continues the study of figurative language and allusions that began in the 6th grade. Students draw upon their prior study of Greek myths in 6th grade History in order to analyze the novel's connection to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The 7th grade English curriculum focuses on books with linear narrative structures, such as *Of Mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck. *The Bluest Eye* introduces students to the idea of circular narrative, a story that begins at the end and uses flashbacks or memory to tell a story. This is a good precursor for

those students who will read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the advanced level Language Enrichment class. Furthermore, one of the goals of the English department of The Children's Storefront is to improve the writing and vocabulary of its students. *The Bluest Eye* lends itself to research papers, expository essays, personal reflections, and creative writing pieces. All Upper School students now use The Cornell System of taking notes in their English and History classes, and lectures on *The Bluest Eye* help reinforce this practice.

In addition, the advanced level vocabulary will help students improve their grasp of the English language. Lastly, one of the themes that is examined in all Storefront English classes is individuality and the formation of group identity. We examine these issues through the study of books such as Lois Lowery's *The Giver* in the 6th grade and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the 7th grade. These themes are continued with our study of *The Bluest Eye* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, later in the term.

Impact of the Book:

The power of *The Bluest Eye* is that it expands our view of what a "black novel" is. It does not take place in the rural south or in the urban north. The characters live among whites, and their language combines dialect and Standard English. Furthermore, the novel provides a forum for students to discuss racism, colorism, bullying, and sexual abuse. It encourages students to think twice before they use the word "black" as an insult or use the terms "nice complexion" or "good hair" to describe something in close proximity to whiteness. Students think about the factors that are necessary to the development of healthy self esteem and the factors that help erode it. They begin to look at how their gender affects how they are treated and how they treat others. They begin to ponder the power of physical beauty and the many types of love.

Potential Problems with the Work:

Many people who have read Toni Morrison (and some who have not) would argue that her work is "too hard" for 8th graders. However, it is important to remember that the characters in the novel are the same age as middle-school students. Although the language and narrative structure of this novel is difficult, the subject matter makes it interesting and relatable. We take almost six months to complete the *The Bluest Eye*, and differentiated lesson plans are key to the success of teaching it effectively. Students read the book in class, listen to the story on tape, and watch excerpts from theater productions. Their understanding of the novel is assessed through essays and exams, but they also write found poems, create art projects, and perform dramatic readings. Toni Morrison is an author that students will read in high-school, college, and beyond, and it is important that their first experience with her work be in a safe and supportive environment where their different learning styles are taken into account. Another criticism of *The Bluest Eye* is the depiction of incest and the graphic nature of the sexual content in the book. However, the rape and incest are essential to the plot and not presented merely to be titillating. Furthermore, sexual abuse is increasingly common among our students. It is important for them to have an opportunity to discuss it, where they can be referred to the Director of Family Support Services if necessary. Today's youth is exposed to increasing levels of sexuality in the media without having the forum to understand or discuss it. When reading the sexual scenes in *The Bluest Eye* students are encouraged to be mature, thoughtful, and sensitive.

Alternative Books:

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little Brown and Co., 2007.

Durrow, Heidi. *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky*. New York: Workman, 2010.

Flake, Sharon. *The Skin I'm In*. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion, 1998.

Senna, Danzy. *Caucasia*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998.

Thurman, Wallace. *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life*. New York: Macaulay Co., 1929.

Yang, Gene Luen. *American Born Chinese*. New York: Square Fish, 2006.

Supplemental Information:

David, Ron. *Toni Morrison Explained: A Reader's Roadmap to the Novels*. New York: Random House, 2000.

Dreifus, Claudia. "Chloe Wofford Talks about Toni Morrison." *The New York Times* (September 11, 1994.)

Leonard, John. "Review of the Bluest Eye," *The New York Times Book Review* (November 1, 1970).

Taylor- Guthrie, Danielle K. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.