The Bluest Eye
Study Guide

Prologues 1 and 2 (“Here is the house…Quiet as it’s kept…”)
1. The first two pages in the prologue repeat lines from the children’s reading book, Fun With Dick And Jane, a primer popular in schools during the 1940’s and 1950’s. The primer describes incidents from the lives of a perfect white family of mother, father, son, daughter, and dog; most black children also had to learn to read using this book. Some critics believe the primer Morrison uses in this story represents the collective voice of the dominant white culture. Assuming this theory is accurate, what message do you think this allusion to the elementary school book might be sending to young black students?
2. Why do you suppose Morrison repeats the words from the elementary school primer over and over without any punctuation?
3. The first line in the second prologue is “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941.” (Pg. 5) Morrison talks about this line in the Afterword because it reminds her of her childhood. She remembers hearing black women use that expression before relating a piece of gossip or an anecdote. To Morrison, it means, “Shh, don’t tell anyone else.” What secret about Pecola does the narrator reveal in the second prologue?
4. What is the relationship between Pecola’s unborn child and the marigold seeds? What might marigolds represent in the story to follow?
5. Parallelism is a literary term referring to a balanced arrangement of sentences or phrases suggesting some correspondence between them. Example: It was the best of time, it was the worse of times…” Find an example of parallelism in the second prologue.
6. Who do you think is narrating the second prologue?

Autumn
Chapter One
1. Who is the narrator for this chapter? Morrison’s writing style includes many descriptive phrases and interesting imagery. What adjectives does she use to describe her home?
2. “But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house.” (Pg. 12) What does the passage above tell the reader about Claudia’s home life?
3. Who is Mr. Henry Washington? How do Claudia and Frieda react when he nicknames them Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers?
4. What literary term is used when the narrator writes, “Even after what came later, there was no bitterness in our memory of him”? (Pg. 16)
5. Why does Pecola come to live with Claudia and Frieda?
6. Why does Claudia describe “outdoors” as the “real terror of life”? (Pg. 17)
7. How do Claudia and Frieda feel about Pecola?
8. Why does Claudia hate Shirley Temple? For what reason might it be significant in this story that both Frieda and Pecola love Shirley Temple, while Claudia, the youngest, hates her?
9. Why does Claudia want to dismember her doll?
10. What does Claudia want for Christmas?
11. Why does Pecola drink three quarts of milk all in one day? What might the milk represent in this story?
12. What evidence is there in this chapter that Pecola’s parents are disinterested in their daughter’s well-being?
13. “Saturdays were lonesome, fuzzy soapy days. Second in misery only to those tight, starchy, cough-drop Sundays, so full of ‘don’ts’ and ‘set’cha self downs.’ ” (Pg. 25) Critic praise Morrison for her interesting and concise descriptions. What is she telling the reader about Saturdays and Sundays in this passage?
14. Find an example of a simile in this chapter. Explain it.
15. How does Claudia’s opinion of Pecola change after Pecola begins menstruating?
16. Frieda tells Pecola that she is now able to have a baby. All she need to do is find someone to love her. Pecola asks, “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” (Pg. 32) What does this comment reveal to the reader about Pecola’s home life?

Chapter Two
1. Briefly describe Pecola’s apartment. What is ironic about her last name?
2. Why is the sofa a source of humiliation for the Breedlove family? Some critics believe the sofa represents something about the Breedlove family.
3. Claudia is the narrator for the first chapter. Why do you suppose Morrison switches from first-person narration to third-person narration for this chapter?
Chapter Three

1. How do the members of the Breedlove family cope with or escape from the ugliness of their lives? Find a metaphor in the description of the family’s ugliness.
2. Why does Mrs. Breedlove enjoy fighting with Cholly?
3. How does Cholly’s humiliation during his first sexual experience contribute to his brutality toward his wife?
4. What evidence is there in this chapter that Sammy and Pecola have a cold, impersonal relationship with their mother?
5. Why do you suppose Mrs. Breedlove throws a quilt over Cholly after she knocks him senseless?
6. What does Pecola do to try to escape from the violence in her home? What does Sammy do?
7. Why does Pecola pray for blue eyes?
8. Some critics believe the dandelions in this story are a metaphor representing Pecola. What is Morrison saying about the black community when she writes, “The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty. But grown-ups say, ‘Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere.’ Hunkie women in black babushkas go into the fields with baskets to pull them up. But they do not want the yellow heads—only the jagged leaves. They make dandelion soup. Dandelion wine. Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong, and soon.” (Pg. 47)
9. What does Pecola see “…lurking in the eyes of all white people”? (Pg. 49)
10. Why does Pecola buy Mary Janes from Mr. Yakobowski instead of some other kind of candy?
11. How do China, Poland, and Miss Marie feel about Pecola? Why does she like to visit them?
12. Some critics state that Pecola and the three whores are similar because they are all outcasts of the community. Pecola reacts to this rejection by praying for blue eyes and trying to become invisible. How do the three whores cope with their rejection?
13. The overall theme of this story is that the collective voice of society, which tells black people they must adhere to white standards and expectations, is destructive to the black people and results in racial self-loathing. Which incident(s) from this chapter help to support this theme?
14. This novel is written in four parts: Autumn, Winter, Spring, and Summer. Autumn is traditionally a time for harvest and dying, winter is a time when crops die and seeds remain dormant, spring is a time for planting and rebirth, and summer is a time for crops to grow and receive nourishment from the sun. Assume the incidents in the story follow the same cycle and that instead of seeds, ideas and feelings are discussed. What ideas about self are planted in Pecola’s mind? What do you think the harvest might be?

WINTER
Chapter One

1. What style of narration is used for this chapter?
2. Who is Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie? How do Claudia and Frieda feel about her?
3. Why is it ironic that Pecola is tormented by black boys?
4. How do Maureen’s family get some of their money?
5. Compare the way Frieda and Claudia react to Maureen’s insults with Pecola’s reaction. Who do you think handles the situation better?
6. “She [Maureen] ran down the street, the green knee socks making her legs look like wild dandelion stems that had somehow lost their heads.” (Pg. 73) “A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back.” (Pg. 62) Consider the descriptions of Maureen above. In what way do they each support the theme that black children’s racial self-worth is damaged or destroyed when they are forced to accept white values and expectations?
7. Claudia describes how she and Frieda feel after fighting with Maureen: “And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us.” (Pg. 74) What Thing is Claudia referring to?
8. Why do Frieda and Claudia decide to keep Mr. Henry’s secret?

Chapter Two

1. Geraldine is described in the following way: “One such girl from Mobile, or Meridian, or Aiken who did not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs, who smelled of wood and vanilla, who had made soufflés in the Home Economics Department, moved with her husband, Louis, to Lorain, Ohio. Her name was Geraldine. There she built her nest, ironed shirts, potted bleeding hearts, played with her cat, and birthed Louis Junior. Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she
could meet them – comfort and satiety. He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod. Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled.” (Pg. 86) In what sense has Geraldine achieved the white lifestyle described in the Dick and Jane books? What is missing from her life?

2. Why does Junior hate the cat?
3. Why do you think Pecola is attracted to Geraldine’s cat?
4. What message about herself does Pecola receive when Geraldine kicks her out of the house? What does Geraldine think about Pecola?
5. Why do you suppose Morrison titles this part of the book Winter?

SPRING
Chapter One
1. Who narrates the first chapter in this section? How does she feel about spring?
2. Why does Frieda want to get some whiskey to drink?
3. What do Claudia’s mother and father do to Mr. Henry?
4. Compare the way Mrs. Breedlove treats her daughter when Pecola spills the blueberry pie with the way she treats the little white girl who lives in the house. What message does Mrs. Breedlove’s behavior send to Pecola? Why is it significant that the little white girl calls Mrs. Breedlove Polly?
6. What can you infer from the last paragraph in the chapter?

Chapter Two (SEEMOTHER)
1. What does Pauline blame for her “general feeling of separateness and unworthiness” that she experienced as a child? How does she try to cope with these feelings?
2. Why is Pauline happy to leave school to stay at home? What happens to give her a sense of dissatisfaction with housework?
3. What is the “Presence” Pauline dreams about? Why are her dreams ironic?
4. Some critics believe the color green in this story represents growth or life. What do you think the following passage might represent? “And that streak of green them june bugs made on the trees the night we left from down home. All of them colors was in me. Just sitting there. So when Cholly come up and tickled my foot, it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together.” (Pg. 115)
5. In what ways is the following passage a metaphor for Pauline and Cholly’s life in the City? “Then the weakened roots [of Pauline’s tooth], having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to severe pressure, and the tooth fell free, leaving a ragged stump behind. But even before the little brown speck, there must have been the conditions, the setting that would allow it to exist in the first place.” (Pg. 116)
6. Why does Pauline go to work? Why does she think the woman she works for is “simpleminded”?
7. In what way does going to the movies harm Pauline?
8. What has happened with the narrative style in this chapter?
9. How do the doctors in the hospital discriminate against Pauline because she is black? How does Pauline respond to their discrimination?
10. What are Pauline’s impressions of her newborn baby girl?
11. The narrator observes that Pauline “…became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs.” (Pg. 127) What needs does Pauline’s job fulfill for her?

Chapter Three (SEEFATHER)
1. Who is Blue Jack? Why does Cholly love him?
2. Folklore is defined as the traditions, beliefs and customs of a people. For example, Elizabethan audiences accepted and understood the folklore of the fairies. Cholly believes that Aunt Jimmy dies because she eats some peach cobbler. How is this incident an example of folklore? Find another example of folklore in this chapter.
3. Why do you suppose Cholly hates Darlene instead of directing his anger toward the white men with the flashlight?
4. For what reason does Cholly decide to run away from town? Why does he decide to find his father?
5. Cholly did not feel sadness at Aunt Jimmy’s funeral, just curiosity. Yet, after meeting his father, Cholly remembers Aunt Jimmy and starts to cry. Why do you suppose he is able to cry when he is alone on the riverbank but not at the funeral?
6. In what sense is Cholly “dangerously free”? (Pg. 159)
7. Why is Cholly ill-equipped to be a father? How does he treat his children?
8. Why does Cholly feel "...revulsion, guilt, pity, then love" for Pecola when he sees his daughter in the kitchen washing the dishes?
9. There is no real for Cholly’s act of rape. However, some critics believe Cholly’s terrible action is explained by his past. Cite some incidents from his past that you believe help to make it possible for him to rape his daughter.
10. In Chapter 3 of Autumn, Pauline covers Cholly with a blanket after knocking him unconscious. Why is it ironic that Cholly covers Pecola with a blanket after raping her?
11. What does the last line in this chapter imply to the reader concerning Pauline’s reaction to Pecola’s rape?

Chapter Four (SEETHEDOG)
1. Briefly describe Soaphead Church. What is the long section about Soaphead’s past called?
2. In what ways does Soaphead Church’s family history help to support the theme that racial self-hatred destroys families and individuals?
3. Why do most of Soaphead’s customers seek out his advice? What does Pecola want from Soaphead? How does he feel about her request?
4. What does the following passage from the story imply? “She [Pecola] stood there, her hands folded across her stomach, a little protruding pot of tummy.” (Pg. 173)
5. Give two reasons Soaphead Church convinces Pecola that to get blue eyes, she must first kill Bob.
6. In his letter to God, Soaphead states, “I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show. I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes.” (Pg. 182) In what sense is Soaphead writing the truth when he says that he gave Pecola her blue eyes?
7. Why do you suppose Morrison titles this section of the book, Spring? Cite incidents from the chapter to support your answer.

SUMMER
Chapter One
1. How do Claudia and Frieda learn about Pecola’s pregnancy? What do the neighborhood women think about Pecola and her unborn child?
2. List two reasons Claudia wants Pecola’s baby to live.
3. What do Claudia and Frieda do in an effort to save Pecola’s baby?

Chapter Two (LOOKLOOKHERECOME)
1. Why do the people in the neighborhood refuse to look at Pecola? Why do Claudia and Frieda look away?
2. Why do you think Pecola goes mad? In what ways did her family and her community fail to protect her?
3. Why do you think this last section is titled Summer?
4. What is ironic about the following passage from the story? “The Maginot Line. And Cholly loved her. I’m sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give her something of himself to her.” (Pg. 206)
5. Overall, this story presents the tragic consequences of racism in on the identity and feelings of self-worth for black children. In your opinion, has the pressure society exerts changed since that time? Discuss the message a black child might receive today concerning physical beauty. What role models are currently in place for black children?
6. In general, how do the words that flow together at some chapters’ beginning reflect the chapters’ contents?