A complicated shame drama and trauma narrative, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* focuses attention on the plight of Pecola Breedlove, an African-American girl who is the victim of inter- and intraracial shaming and who is severely traumatized by her physically abusive mother and sexually abusive father. If Morrison seems intent on using her fiction to gain temporary narrative mastery over the shame-laden traumas she describes, she also wants to involve her readers emotionally in her work. Her writing “demands participatory reading,” as she has remarked. “The reader supplies the emotions. … He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience” (Tate 164).

Morrison’s story of Pecola and her wish for blue eyes grew out of a conversation Morrison remembered having with a girl of one of her elementary school friends, who told Morrison that she knew that God did not exist because her prayers for blue eyes had gone unanswered (Ruas 95). Morrison recalls how she felt “astonished by the desecration” her friend proposed and how she, for the first time, experienced the “shock” of the word “beautiful.” Recognizing the implicit “racial self-loathing” in her friend’s desire, Morrison, twenty years later, found herself still wondering how her girlhood friend had learned such feelings. “Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?” (“Afterword” 209-10).

Morrison began working on *The Bluest Eye*, which was published in 1970, first as a story in 1962 and then as a novel in 1965, a time when there was public focus on the issue of racial beauty. bell hooks, remarking on how the Black Power movement of the 1960s “addressed the issue of internalized racism in relation to beauty,” observes that the “Black is beautiful” slogan “worked to intervene and alter those racist stereotypes that had always insisted black was ugly, monstrous, undesirable” (173, 174). Morrison, who was in part responding to the 1960s black liberation movement in *The Bluest Eye*, recalls that the “reclamation of racial beauty” made her question why racial beauty was not “taken for granted” within the African-American community, why it needed “wide public articulation to exist.” Coming to recognize the “damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze,” Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, set out to describe “how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (“Afterword” 210).

In dramatizing “the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause” (“Afterword” 210), Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* explores the chronic shame of being an African American in white America. *The Bluest Eye* reveals that the shame experience, as recent psychoanalytic investigators have explained, is at once interpersonal and internal, involving not only the individual’s feelings of inferiority and inadequacy in comparison to others but also the individual’s deep inner sense of being flawed or defective or of having failed to meet the expectations of the “ideal self.” At the core of shame, writes Léon Wurmser, is the “conviction of one’s unlovability” because of an inherent sense that the self is “weak, dirty, and defective” (Mask 92, 93). In the classic shame scenario, in which the “eye is the organ of shame par excellence,” the individual feels exposed and humiliated—looked at with contempt for being inferior, flawed, or dirty—and thus wants to hide or disappear (Wurmsr, “Shame” 67). Fear of visual exposure, as Wurmsr explains, leads to the wish to “disappear as the person” one has shown oneself to be, or “to be [seen as] different” than one is (Mask 232). In presenting the lives of the Breedloves, *The Bluest Eye* dramatizes “shame-vulnerability”—that is, “a sensitivity to, and readiness for, shame”—and “shame anxiety,” which is “evoked by the imminent danger of unexpected exposure, humiliation, and rejection” (Andrew Morrison 14; Wurmsr, *Mask* 49). And
Morrison’s novel also depicts the affects and defenses that accompany the shame situation: the self-loathing and self-disgust, the searing or numbing, paralyzing pain of shame-humiliation, the wish to conceal the self, and the deep rage, which is often expressed in the “attack other” script as the reactive desire to shame and humiliate others (see Nathanson 360-73).

Described by Donald Nathanson as a work that provides a “prolonged immersion in the world of shame” (463), *The Bluest Eye*, in the peripheral story of Soaphead Church, points to an important cultural source of racial shame in the mid-to-late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century biosocial myth of racial degeneration: that is, the view that blacks are biologically inferior and belong to a degenerate race, and that under certain conditions, they can revert to a more primitive—if not degraded and bestial—state: A West Indian with light-brown skin, Soaphead comes from a family that “married up” and thus lightened the family complexion, and he has been affected by his family’s racist ideas. Anglophiles who were proud of their mixed blood and convinced of their superiority, they hoped “to prove beyond a doubt De Gobineau’s hypothesis that ‘all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it’” (168). Acting out a countershaming strategy, the narrative contests this racist notion by describing Sir Whitcomb, who introduced the “white strain” into the family, as a degenerate type—as a “decaying British nobleman, who chose to disintegrate under a sun more easeful than England’s” (167). Similarly, Elihue Whitcomb, who is later known as Soaphead Church, is referred to as one of the flawed members of the family in whom the “original genes of the decaying lord” become expressed (168).

Despite his “noble bloodlines,” Soaphead sinks into a life of “rapidly fraying gentility,” and he comes to take comfort in the label “misanthrope” (171, 164). A shame-obsessed and shame-driven individual who has internalized his family’s racist ideas, Soaphead has a “disdain of human contact,” for he finds other people disgusting and contaminating (165). Abhorring “flesh on flesh”—he is overwhelmed by body and breath odors, disquieted by the body’s “natural excretions,” such as skin crusts, ear wax, blackheads, and moles—he molests little girls, for their bodies are not so offensive to him (166). Indeed, with little girls, “it is all clean,” and there isn’t any “nastiness” or “filth,” and he doesn’t feel “dirty” afterwards (181). Soaphead, as the narrative describes him, is “what one might call a very clean old man” (167). Because Soaphead projects his fear of his own racial contamination—that is, his own inherited blackness—onto others, contact with people other than little girls produces in him “a faint but persistent nausea,” and he feels that “decay, vice, filth, and disorder” are “pervasive” (164, 172).

“It is not necessary to create a Gobineau-like hierarchy of races as victims,” writes Sander Gilman, to observe that blacks “have been singled out with uncommon frequency” to serve the “function of the Other in the West” (130). In the history of the representation of African Americans one can uncover the “age-old associations of the black with corruption and disease,” and blacks also have been associated not only with “pathology” but also with “psychopathology” (132). The image of the “dangerous Other”—who is at once “ill and infectious,” “damaged and damaging”—serves “as the focus for the projection of anxiety concerning the self” (130). The power of such “ever-receding images should not be underestimated,” writes Gilman. “They remain impressed on a culture as on a palimpsest, shaping and coloring all of the images that evolve at later dates” (239). And indeed, Joel Kovel, in his psychosymbolic analysis of white racism, comments that few groups “have suffered the appellation of filthiness” so much as blacks. In aversive white racism where there is a sense of disgust at the dirtiness of black bodies and black people, Kovel finds “a quintessential fantasy of Otherness—for the black body from which the white ego flees is his own body” (82, xlv). African Americans, in other words, have served as the container for white shame—that is, for projected fears and anxieties that the self is defective and dirty; moreover, the darker-skinned and poor black has become the “dangerous Other” for lighter-skinned and middle-class blacks in the African American community.

In contemporary America where, as Morrison has described it, “blackness is itself a stain,” racist codes remain pervasive (“Introduction” xviii). Like Soaphead, who has internalized the belief in the superiority of the white and the inferiority of the stained black race, the “poor and black” Breedloves have internalized the contempt and loathing directed at them from the shaming gaze of the humiliator—that is, the white culture—and thus they believe that they are “relentlessly and aggressively ugly” (38).

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. “Yes,” they had said. “You are right.” (39)
In what Morrison describes as the “woundability” of Pecola Breedlove (“Afterword” 210), *The Bluest Eye* dramatizes an extreme form of the shame-vulnerability and shame-anxiety of African Americans in white America. Morrison also depicts the intergenerational transmission of shame in her novel, showing how it is passed down from parent to child. For not only does Pecola’s mother shame her, but Cholly Breedlove, when he rapes Pecola, acts out a shame drama as he projects his deep-rooted feelings of humiliation and rage—his self-loathing and self-contempt—onto his daughter. And in the response of members of the African-American community—who end up collectively scapegoating Pecola—the novel reveals how humiliated individuals can temporarily rid themselves of their shame by humiliating others. Indeed, the “ugly” Pecola becomes the ultimate carrier of her family’s—and her African-American community’s—shame. *The Bluest Eye*, then, is a complicated shame drama. And it also is a trauma narrative, for Pecola, as Morrison has aptly described her, is “a total and complete victim,” and she is a victim not only of racial shaming but also of her “crippled and crippling family” (Steph 17; “Afterword” 210). In a relentless way, *The Bluest Eye* depicts the progressive traumatization of Pecola—who is rejected and physically abused by her mother, sexually abused by her alcoholic and unpredictably violent father, and ultimately scapegoated by members of the community. In her novel Morrison reveals that, as some investigators of trauma have argued, trauma can result not only from a “single assault” or “discrete event,” but also from “a constellation of life’s experiences,” a “prolonged exposure to danger” or a “continuing pattern of abuse” (Erikson 457). The novel also shows how “inevitably” destructive incest is to the child (Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest* 4). Ultimately, “the damage done” to Pecola is “total,” and she steps “over into madness” (*Bluest Eye* 204, 206). Her self damaged beyond repair, Pecola retreats from real life and converses with her alter identity, her only “friend”: that is, she ends up living permanently in the dissociated world of the severely traumatized individual.

Aware that the traumatic, shame-laden subject matter of her novel is potentially disturbing to the reader, Morrison, in the opening words of Claudia’s narration—“Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941”—enticed the reader by invoking the intimate “back fence” world of “illicit gossip.” In Morrison’s description, the opening phrase—“Quiet as it’s kept”—is “conspiratorial”: “Shh, don’t tell anyone else,” and ‘No one is allowed to know this.’ It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us. … In some sense it was precisely what the act of writing the book was: the public exposure of a private confidence.” If the publication of the book involved exposure, the writing of *The Bluest Eye* “was the disclosure of secrets, secrets we’ve shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community.” Underlying the conspiratorial whisper was the assumption that the teller of the story was about to impart “privileged information.” “The intimacy I was aiming for,” Morrison remarks, “the intimacy between the reader and the page, could start up immediately because the secret is being shared, at best, and eavesdropped upon, at the least. Sudden familiarity or instant intimacy seemed crucial to me. I did not want the reader to have time to wonder, ‘What do I have to do, to give up, in order to read this? What defense do I need, what distance maintain?’” (“Afterword” 212-13).

By foregrounding the flowers and backgrounding the shameful fact of incest—“We thought … it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow”—Morrison protects the reader “from a confrontation too soon with the painful details,” but also provokes the reader “into a desire to know them.” The opening, as she describes it, “provides the stroke that announces something more than a secret shared, but a silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last.” By “transferring the problem of fathoming” to the readers, “the inner circle of listeners,” the novel justifies the “public exposure of a privacy.” If readers enter into the “conspiracy” announced by the opening words, “then the book can be seen to open with its close: a speculation on the disruption of ‘nature’ as being a social disruption with tragic individual consequences” in which readers, “as part of the population of the text,” are “implicated” (“Afterword” 213-14). And by breaking the narrative “into parts” that have to be “reassembled,” Morrison attempts to lead her readers “into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing” of the Pecolas of this world (“Afterword” 211). Despite Morrison’s complaint that “many readers remain touched but not moved” by Pecola’s story (“Afterword” 211), *The Bluest Eye*, as we shall see in our analysis of the critical conversation surrounding the novel, not only has provoked feelings of shame or bystander’s guilt in readers, but it also has induced critic after critic to enact the trauma-specific and antishaming roles of advocate or rescuer, or to become unwitting participants in the shame drama of blaming and attacking the other in their critical responses to the novel.

In writing about the Breedlove family and Cholly’s incestuous rape of Pecola, Morrison risks traumatizing readers, and she also sets up potential shame conflicts in them as she openly appeals to their active curiosity by positioning them as eavesdroppers and voyeurs, as onlookers onto a shameful family secret. If a mature sense of shame—that is, the recognition that some phenomena are “intrinsically private” and must be “protected by limited access”—shields the “private sphere from exposure” and safeguards the individual in
moments of “increased vulnerability,” it is also the case that “family privacy” has served to conceal the fact that the family provides “a dangerous hiding place for family violence and sexual abuse” (Schneider 41, xv, 55; Mason 30). In her strategic public exposure of the incest secret, Morrison breaks the taboo on looking and thus risks shaming her readers. For just as those who are exposed feel shame, so observers of shaming scenes can feel shame. Indeed, “Shame, by its nature, is contagious. Moreover, just as shame has an intrinsic tendency to encourage hiding, so there is a tendency for the observer of another’s shame to turn away from it” (Lewis 15-16).

Speaking the unspeakable, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is permeated with shame and trauma. But it also uses narrative structure and aesthetic design not only to fascinate and impress readers—and thus to counteract shame—but also to partially defend against the horrors it is assigned to uncover. If an early version of the novel presented the fragmented narrative of Pecola, the shamed trauma victim—for *The Bluest Eye* was originally the story of Pecola and her family narrated in the third person “in pieces like a broken mirror”—Morrison, finding that “there was no connection between the life of Pecola, her mother and father,” introduced Claudia as an “I”-narrator and thus provided in the narrative someone to “empathize” with Pecola and also to “relieve the grimness” of the narrative (Ruas 97). But for Morrison, despite her careful structuring of the novel, there remained a problem in the “central chamber” of the narrative.

The shattered world I built (to complement what is happening to Pecola), its pieces held together by seasons in childtime and commenting at every turn on the incompatible and barren white-family primer, does not in its present form handle effectively the silence at its center: the void that is Pecola’s “unbeing.” It should have had a shape—like the emptiness left by a boom or a cry.

*(Afterword 214-15)*

In narratively building a “shattered world” around the “void” of Pecola’s “unbeing,” Morrison calls attention to the careful design and structure of the novel. But she also, while depicting the incestuous rape of Pecola, partly denies the horrors she sets out to describe. That Morrison chooses to narrate the rape from the father’s point of view and that she herself has described the rape as an “awful” thing and yet as “almost irrelevant” (Tate 164) is suggestive, given the fact that “[d]enial, avoidance, and distancing” are common responses to incest (Herman, “Father-Daughter Incest” 182). Thus, the rape scene is the emotional center of the novel and yet it is oddly muted as the narrative proliferates, telling stories—including the tragic and sympathetic stories of Pauline, the complicit mother, and Cholly, the violating father—around the empty center of the text, the “void” of the silenced and backgrounded incest victim.

From the outset of *The Bluest Eye*, readers are aware that part of Morrison’s agenda, as she describes the victimization and shaming of Pecola, is to dialogically contest the idealized depiction of American life described in the Dick and Jane primer story:

*Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. … She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? … See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. … See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. … Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane.*

*(3)*

Morrison explains that she uses the Dick and Jane primer story, with its depiction of a happy white family, “as a frame acknowledging the outer civilization,” and then she runs together the words of the primer story—“Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhite” (4)—because she wants “the primer version broken up and confused” (LeClair 127). Through this “broken up” and “confused” discourse—which is found in the opening frame narrative and, as the narrative progresses, is used to head the chapters focusing on Pecola and those who traumatize her—Morrison signals the increasingly fragmented world of the trauma victim. Morrison’s stark reversals of the idealized discourse of the Dick-and-Jane primer story also communicate to readers the intense, but highly controlled, feelings of anger that drive the narrative. Thus the chapters of the novel that are headed with the primer descriptions of Jane’s idealized “green and white house” and her “happy” family introduce readers to the decaying store-front dwelling where the “ugly” Breedloves live; the chapters that begin with primer accounts of the dog and cat tell pointed stories of animal abuse; the chapters headed with primer descriptions of the “very nice” mother and “big and strong” father who “smiles” at his daughter describe the mother’s physical and the father’s sexual abuse of Pecola; and the chapter headed with the primer passage describing Jane’s playful “friend” relates Pecola’s conversation with her only “friend,” her dissociated alter self. Part of the novel’s explicit agenda is to assess the “why” and the “how” of Pecola’s plight. Although
Claudia, the narrator, insists that she takes “refuge in how” (6), the narrative is driven by the desire to elucidate the “why” of the Breedloves’ story and to indict the cultural—and also family—forces that lead to the destruction of the vulnerable and shame-sensitive Pecola.

While the story of Pecola—who suffers from profound shame-anxiety, feels unlovable and ugly, and thus acts out the defensive hiding and withdrawal behavior characteristic of shame-vulnerable individuals—is at the center of the text, The Bluest Eye, through the interconnected experiences of Pecola and Claudia, enacts a complicated shame drama. If Pecola’s characteristic body language fits Donald Nathanson’s description of the “purest presentation of the affect shame-humiliation”—the eyes are averted and downcast, the head droops, and the shoulders slump (see 134-36)—and if Pecola so internalizes white contempt for her blackness that she wishes to be invisible or desires to have blue eyes so that others will love and accept her, Claudia, in contrast, gives expression to the anger experienced by the shamed individual, the desire to flail out that signals an attempt to rid the self of shame (see Andrew Morrison 13-14).

Unlike Pecola, who is the passive and utterly shamed victim, Claudia questions why people look at little white girls and say “Awwwww” but do not look at her that way. “The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them” (22-23) anger her. Unlike Pecola who dreams of having blue eyes, Claudia responds with rage when she is given a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned baby doll as a “special” gift. “I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me” (20). According to the official culture—the world of adults, shops, magazines, and window signs—girls treasure such dolls, but Claudia defiantly pokes at the doll’s glass eyes, breaks off its fingers, and removes its head. “I destroyed white baby dolls,” she recalls. “But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others” (22).

Claudia’s reactive rage is evident in her response not only to interracial but also to intraracial shaming. When the white Rosemary Villanucci rebuffs Claudia and her sister, Frieda, Claudia wants to “poke the arrogance” out of Rosemary’s eyes and “make red marks on her white skin” (9). Claudia feels the “familiar violence” rise in her when she witnesses the little white girl, who lives in the house where Pauline Breedlove works as a housekeeper, call Mrs. Breedlove “Polly,” even though Pecola herself calls her mother “Mrs. Breedlove” (108). And Claudia’s angry reaction to Maureen Peal reveals the force of intraracial shaming within the African-American community. A “high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back” (62), Maureen Peal enchants everyone at the school: the teachers smile at her when they call on her in class; black boys do not trip her in the hallways nor do white boys stone her; white girls readily accept her as their work partner, and black girls move aside when she wants to use the sink in the girls’ washroom. Claudia and Frieda, in an attempt to recover their equilibrium, search for flaws in the much-admired Maureen. They secretly refer to her as “Meringue pie”; they are pleased when they discover that she has a dog tooth; and they smile when they learn that she was born with six fingers on each hand and had this flaw surgically corrected. When Claudia, who is assigned a locker next to Maureen, thinks of the “unearned haughtiness” in Maureen’s eyes, she plots “accidental slammings of locker doors” on Maureen’s hand (63). And yet, despite her jealousy, Claudia is “secretly prepared” to be Maureen’s friend, and over time Claudia is “even able to hold a sensible conversation” with Maureen without visualizing Maureen falling off a cliff or without “giggling” her way into what she thinks is “a clever insult” (63-64).

But ultimately Maureen pronounces judgment on Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda—insisting that she is “cute” and that the three girls are “[b]lack and ugly.” While Claudia and Frieda are temporarily “stunned” by the “weight” of Maureen’s shaming remark, they also recover themselves enough to reactively and publicly shame Maureen by shouting out the “most powerful” chant in their “arsenal of insults”—“Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie!” Pecola, in contrast, enacts the classic withdrawing and concealing behavior of the humiliated individual as she folds into herself, “like a pleated wing.” Pecola’s visible pain and shame at the public exposure of her inner sense of defectiveness antagonizes Claudia, who would prefer that Pecola assume a defiant antishame posture. “I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes” (73-74). And yet Claudia also identifies, in part, with Pecola’s shame as she sinks under “the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance” of Maureen’s taunt. If Maureen is “cute,” Claudia recognizes, then she is somehow “lesser,” unworthy. Claudia can destroy white dolls, but she is unable to destroy “the honey voices of parents and aunts,” or the “obedience” found in the eyes of her contemporaries, or the “slippery
light” in the eyes of teachers when they encounter “the Maureen Peals of the world.” Despite this, Claudia also recognizes that Maureen is “not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred.” Instead, the “Thing to fear” is what makes Maureen—but not Claudia, Frieda, or Pecola—“beautiful” (74).

The “Thing” Claudia learns to fear is the white, racist standard of beauty that members of the African-American community have internalized, a standard that favors the “high-yellow” Maureen Peal and denigrates the “black and ugly” Pecola Breedlove. Yet Claudia also partially internalizes this white standard over time. For the same Claudia who once dismembered white dolls and wanted to axe little white girls becomes ashamed of her own range—her desire to hurt little white girls and hear their “fascinating cry of pain.” When she comes to view her “disinterested violence” as “repulsive”—and she finds it repulsive because it is disinterested—her “shame” flounders about “for refuge” and finds a “hiding place” in love. “Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love,” remarks Claudia. Although Claudia later learns to “worship” Shirley Temple—a popular figure she once responded to with “unsullied hatred”—this change is “adjustment without improvement” (23, 19, 23). Indeed, as The Bluest Eye reveals, because the standard of beauty—that is, the idealized version of the black self—is based on whiteness, the Pecolas and Claudias of the world cannot help but feel ashamed. For shame “is a reflection of feelings about the whole self in failure, as inferior in competition or in comparison with others, as inadequate and defective” (Andrew Morrison 12).

If the ultimate “Enemy” that shames and traumatizes African Americans is the racist white society, there are also more immediate and intimate enemies within the African-American community and family. Unlike Claudia, who is shame-sensitive but also uses defiance to defend herself against the pain of shame, Pecola suffers from an extreme and destructive form of chronic shame-vulnerability and shame-anxiety. Focusing on both the cultural and familial sources of Pecola’s profound and crippling shame, The Bluest Eye reveals how Pecola’s parents transmit to their daughter their own sense of inferiority and defectiveness, their own “ugliness.”

Pecola’s mother, Pauline—whose sense of defectiveness is intensified by her “crooked, archless foot” that causes her to limp (110)—ultimately transfers to her daughter her own “general feeling of separateness and unworthiness,” and her own borrowed ideas about beauty that lead inevitably to “self-contempt” (111, 122). For as a young married woman, Pauline goes to the movies, and after she absorbs “in full”—that is, internalizes—the racist beauty standards conveyed in films, she is “never able … to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty” (122). Pauline identifies with white movie stars—she even affects a Jean Harlow hairstyle—but then, when she loses a front tooth, she resigns herself “to just being ugly” (123). Adding to Pauline’s feeling of inferiority is the fact that she is also subjected to intraracial shaming, for when she first moves to the North she discovers that Northern blacks are “[n]o better than whites for meanness” and that they can make her feel “just as no-count” as whites (117).

Pauline’s feeling that she is “ugly”—that is, inferior and defective—is reinforced during the shame-drama of Pecola’s birth. When Pauline is about to deliver Pecola, she overhears the white doctors at the hospital refer to black women like her as animals, that is, as racially degenerate: “They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses.” When the birth pangs begin, Pauline moans “something awful” to let the doctors know that delivering a baby is “more than a bowel movement.” Shamed by the doctors who treat her as an object of contempt, Pauline unconsciously equates her child with excrement: that is, with something dirty and disgusting. And the fact that Pauline describes her new-born baby as “ugly”—“Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly”—suggests that from the outset Pauline projects her own sense of “ugliness” onto her daughter (124-25, 126).

Employing a classic “attack other” shame defense, Pauline does express contempt for the white family she works for during her first steady job as a housekeeper, describing them as “dirty,” which is how poor African Americans are perceived by whites: “None of them knew so much as how to wipe their behinds. I know, ’cause I did the washing. And couldn’t ‘ee proper to save their lives. … Nasty white folks is about the nastiest things they is” (119-20). And yet when Pauline works for the well-to-do Fishers, she becomes “what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs” (127). That is, only when Pauline embraces her black shame by assuming the inferior role of the ideal servant at the home of the white Fishers is she able to meet the goals of her ideal self and win the white approbation she desires. In the Fisher household, unlike in her “dingy” storefront dwelling, Pauline finds “beauty, order, cleanliness,” and when Pauline acts as the representative of the Fishers, the creditors and service people—who would normally humiliate her—respect her and are even “intimidated” by her (127, 128). While Pauline dotes on the little white Fisher girl, she neglects and physically
abuses Pecola, transferring to her daughter her deep-rooted contempt for her own blackness. Trying to make Pecola respectable, she teaches her fear of being a clumsy person, of being like her father, of being unloved by God—that is, fear of being inadequate and defective. And she beats into Pecola “a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128).

Like Pauline, Cholly Breedlove transfers his own chronic shame—his own feelings of humiliation and defeat—to his daughter. Not only is Cholly “[a]bandoned in a junk heap by his mother, [and] rejected for a crap game by his father,” but he also is subjected to the racist insults that are “part of the nuisances of life” (160, 153). In a central scene of interracial shaming, Cholly is utterly humiliated when he is forced, during his initial sexual encounter as an adolescent, to perform sexually for two white hunters. The fourteen-year-old Cholly is “terrified” when he is discovered by two white men carrying long guns while he is “newly but earnestly engaged in eliciting sexual pleasure from a little country girl” (42). When one of the white men, who shines a flashlight on the scene, commands Cholly to “‘Get on wid it. … An’ make it good, nigger, make it good,’” Cholly hates the girl, Darlene, not the white men. While he simulates lovemaking, he almost wishes “he could do it—hard, long, and painfully,” because he hates Darlene “so much” (148). Paralyzed by shame, he either obsesses over this episode or feels a “vacancy in his head” afterwards. Rather than hating the white men, he cultivates his hatred of the girl. “Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke.” Thus he despises Darlene, for she has witnessed “his failure, his impotence” and he was unable to protect her (150-51).

Seeking comfort but unwilling to reveal his shame to Blue—an older man the boy Cholly views as a father-surrogate figure—Cholly runs away to find his real father. Yet when he finally encounters his father, and his father asks whose “boy” he is, Cholly doesn’t say, “I’m your boy,” because that sounds “disrespectful.” Cholly is devastated when he is brutally rejected by his belligerent father—“[G]et the fuck outta my face!”—and that “[e]verybody” will “laugh.” Fearing shameful visual exposure, the mortified Cholly, “[i]n panic,” takes flight: “Cholly ran down the street, aware only of silence. People’s mouths moved, their feet moved, a car juggled by—but with no sound. … His own feet made no sound.” Temporarily numbed and paralyzed by shame, Cholly conceals himself under a pile near a river, and he remains “knotted there in fetal position, paralyzed, his fists covering his eyes, for a long time. No sound, no sight. … He even forgot his messed-up trousers” (157). Shame, as Wurmser remarks, is the “affect of contempt directed against the self—by others or by one’s own conscience. Contempt says: ‘You should disappear as such a being as you have shown yourself to be—failing, weak, flawed, and dirty. Get out of my sight: Disappear!’” To be exposed as one who fails someone else’s or one’s own expectations causes shame, and to “disappear into nothing is the punishment for such failure” (“Shame” 67).

If as an adolescent Cholly is deeply traumatized and shamed at the disgraceful exposure of his self as weak and contemptible, as an adult even a “half-remembrance” of the episode with the white hunters, “along with myriad other humiliations, defeats, and emasculations, could stir him into flights of depravity that surprised himself—but only himself” (42-43). Cholly, who has the “meanest eyes in town” (40), lives in a chronic state of humiliated fury, and he vents his anger on “petty things and weak people” (38), including members of his own family. Cholly defends himself by assuming the defiant posture of the “[d]angerously free” man, who is “[f]ree to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep. … Free to take a woman’s insults, for his body had already conquered hers. Free even to knock her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms.” The fact that the “dangerously free” Cholly has retaliated against white men—Cholly is “free to say, ‘No, suh,’ and smile, for he had already killed three white men” (159)—reveals that he has attempted to rid himself of his unendurable shame by attacking and destroying those who have shamed him. As Silvan Tomkins observes, “Depending upon the intensity and depth of humiliation, and the feelings of helplessness which grip him, the individual will struggle to express his humiliation, to undo humiliation, to turn the tables on his oppressor and at the extreme to destroy him to recover his power to deal with intolerable humiliation” (296).

A broken, bitter man who flaunts his shame, Cholly ends up as the utterly degraded, and thus socially ostracized, individual when he puts his family “outdoors.” “[T]hat old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife’s head, and everybody, as a result, was outdoors. Outdoors, we knew, was the
real terror of life.” While people could drink or gamble themselves outdoors, “to be slack enough to put oneself outdoors, or heartless enough to put one’s own kin outdoors—that was criminal” (16-17). An object of contempt and disgust, Cholly, in his defiant display of shameless behavior—his shamelessness serving as a defense against his deep-rooted shame-anxiety—catapults himself “beyond the reaches of human consideration”: “He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger” (18). Contempt by others, as Wurmser remarks, is a type of aggression that degrades the individual’s value, “equating him particularly with a debased, dirty thing—a derided and low animal.” The humiliated person is “shunned,” “sent into solitude,” “discarded from the communality of civilized society” (Mask 81, 82). It is also interesting that the communal shaming of Cholly repeats racist discourse by describing Cholly as a degenerate type—as someone who has reverted to an animal state.

That “contempt” is a “cold’ affect,” a form of aggression that wants to “eliminate the other being” (Wurmser, Mask 81, 80), is evident in the ritualized quarrels that occur in the Breedlove marriage. To Pauline, her fights with Cholly give “substance” to the dull sameness of her life (41). Wearing the antishame mask of Christian respectability, Pauline views herself as an “upright and Christian woman, burdened with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish,” and she pleads with Jesus to “help her ’strike the bastard down from his pea-knuckle of pride.” If Pauline’s Christian pride and retaliatory fantasies are reaction formations against her deep-seated shame, Cholly’s “inarticulate fury,” which he vents on his wife, signals his attempt to express and temporarily rid himself of his shame-rage. “Hating her, he could leave himself intact” (42). Pauline and Cholly beat each other “with a darkly brutal formalism.” “Tacitly they had agreed not to kill each other. ... There was only the muted sound of falling things, and flesh on unsurprised flesh” (43).

What Pecola learns from her parents—that like them she is “ugly”—is confirmed by the hostile gaze and insulting speech of others. Pecola’s ugliness makes her “ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike,” and when a girl wants to especially insult a boy, she simply accuses him of loving Pecola, a taunt that provokes “peals of laughter from those in earshot” (45, 46). To Geraldine, who teaches her son “the difference between colored people and niggers”—“[c]olored people” like her are “neat and quiet” while “niggers” are “dirty and loud” (87)—Pecola is an object of disgust and contempt.

In the deliberately staged encounter between Pecola and Geraldine, The Bluest Eye focuses attention on the connection between class and shame in the African-American community. Geraldine is identified by the narrator as one of the “brown girls,” who have internalized white, middle-class standards of beauty and behavior, and who, in developing “high morals” and “good manners,” have lost their “funkiness,” that is, their passion and spontaneity (82, 83). Donning the mask of middle-class respectability perhaps, in part, in an effort to disassociate themselves from the shaming racist and sexist stereotype of the “oversexed-black-Jezebel”—a pervasive stereotype that views African-American women not only as connoting sex but also as instigators of sex (Painter 209-10)—the “plain brown” women walk with their “behind[s] in for fear of a sway too free,” and they give their sons to their husbands “sparingly and partially” (84, 83, 84). Geraldine, a middle-class “brown” woman, shuns Pecola, who embodies the shame and stigma of black poverty. Pointing to the class differences among black people, the narrative describes Geraldine’s perception of Pecola, viewing the under-class Pecola through Geraldine’s black, middle-class—and shaming—gaze.

When Geraldine looks at Pecola—who has a torn and soiled dress with a safety pin holding up the hem, muddy shoes and dirty socks, and matted hair where the plaits sticking out on her head have come undone—she feels that she has “seen this little girl all of her life” (91). Geraldine’s revulsion toward poor blacks like Pecola—whom she sees as dirty and subhuman—reveals her internalization of the racist idea of black degeneracy. To Geraldine, such children “were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds. ... Tin cans and tires blossomed where they lived. They lived on cold black-eyed peas and orange pop. Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled” (92). That the “affective roots” of prejudice, as Donald Nathanson remarks, involve “dissmell and disgust” (133) is also apparent in this passage. Linked to the “phenomenology of interpersonal rejection,” dissmell is a primitive mechanism by which individuals keep at a distance those people that they define “as too awful or too foul to get near” (124). Moreover, the “purpose or function of contempt seems to be to instill in the other person a sense of self-dissmell or self-disgust and therefore shame at self-unworthiness” (129). When Geraldine contemptuously pronounces Pecola a “nasty little black bitch” (92), her shaming words reinforce Pecola’s fear of exposure and rejection and intensify her feeling that she is ugly, dirty, and defective.

Similarly, in the vacant gaze of the white store owner, Mr. Yacobowski, Pecola senses racial contempt. “He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see.” In his “total absence of human recognition—the
glazed separateness”—Pecola senses his distaste. “The distaste must be for her, her blackness. … [I]t is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (48-49). After Pecola purchases three Mary Jane candies from Mr. Yacobowski, she attempts to soothe herself. Outside his store, she “feels the inexplicable shame ebb” and takes temporary refuge in anger. “Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging.” But when she recalls Mr. Yacobowski’s eyes, her shame “wells up again.” Attempting to overcome her inner feelings of defectiveness, she imagines that to eat the Mary Jane candy is to “eat the eyes” of, indeed is to “[b]e,” Mary Jane—the blond-haired, blue-eyed white girl pictured on the candy wrapper (50). To incorporate and thus “be”—that is, merge with—the idealized Mary Jane is to be an object of admiration, not contempt, and to turn the shaming or ostracizing gaze of others into a look of approval and acceptance.

In a pivotal episode, which purposefully and with didactic intent brings together the “ugly” black Pecola and the “high-yellow” Maureen Peal, Morrison underscores the pain and rage of intraracial shaming. When Claudia, her sister, Frieda, and Maureen Peal notice that there is some commotion going on in the schoolyard playground and stop to investigate, they discover that a group of black boys is “circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove.” “[T]hrilled by the easy power of a majority,” the boys “gaily” harass Pecola with an extemporaneous, insulting verse: “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked.” What gives the first insult “its teeth” is their “contempt for their own blackness.” Repeating what has been done to them and attempting to rid themselves of their own deeply rooted sense of racial shame and self-loathing, they humiliate Pecola. Their “exquisitely learned self-hatred” and “elaborately designed hopelessness” become expressed in their angry, insulting speech, and they dance a “macabre ballet” around Pecola, “whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit” of their scorn (65).

Responding passively to her public shaming, the crying Pecola edges around the circle of boys. The taunting stops when an angry Frieda and Claudia intervene. But the rescue of Pecola is short-lived. When Maureen Peal, who initially seems friendly to Pecola, asks if Pecola has, indeed, ever seen a naked man, Pecola becomes “agitated” and remarks that no girl’s father would appear naked in front of his daughter “unless he was dirty”—that is, shameful and debased (71). Retorting that she asked Pecola about a naked man and not her father, Maureen insists that Pecola has, in fact, seen her own father naked. If Maureen’s words suggest that there is already community suspicion about the possibility of sexual abuse in the Breedlove family, Pecola’s physical response to Maureen’s accusation is also suggestive. Enacting the characteristic hiding or concealing behavior of the shamed individual, “Pecola tucked her head in—a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears” (72). But when Maureen taunts Claudia by calling her “black” (73), Claudia, unlike Pecola who responds passively to Maureen’s insults, flails out angrily and defiantly at the humiliator, giving physical expression to Pecola’s unexpressed rage. Claudia also takes on the role of the protector-rescuer in this scene. Yet it is telling that when Claudia swings at Maureen, she misses and instead hits Pecola in the face. Despite her enactment of the protector’s role, Claudia, as this scene reveals, also shares at some deep level the community impulse to victimize Pecola: that is, to rid herself of her own shame by scapegoating the utterly vulnerable Pecola.

In the plight of Pecola Breedlove, *The Bluest Eye* dramatizes what Wurmser describes as the “theme” of unlovability—“the triad of weakness, defectiveness, and dirtiness” that occurs in the classic shame situation (*Mask* 98). Feeling unloved by her parents and “ugly” in the gaze of others, Pecola defends herself by withdrawing. “Concealed, veiled, eclipsed,” she hides behind her “mantle” of ugliness, “peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask” (39). The “goal of hiding as part of the shame affect,” as Wurmser explains, is “to prevent further exposure and, with that, further rejection, but it also atones for the exposure that has already occurred” (*Mask* 54). That Pecola, who is terrified by her parents’ physical violence, wants to “disappear” is also suggestive. “If it is appearance (exposure) that is central in shame, disappearance is the logical outcome of shame,” writes Wurmser (*Mask* 81). Indeed, “[s]hame’s aim is disappearance. This may be, most simply, in the form of hiding; … most archaically in the form of freezing into complete paralysis and stupor; most frequently, in the form of forgetting parts of one’s life and one’s self; and at its most differentiated, in the form of changing one’s character” (*Mask* 84). Pecola’s attempt to bodily disappear also marks the beginning of her experiences of depersonalization: that is, her “estrangement from world and self” that Wurmser describes as symptomatic of shame anxiety (*Mask* 53). Pecola “squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. … Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. … The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left” (45).
Pecola, who is unable to make her eyes disappear, spends hours looking at herself in the mirror, “trying to discover the secret” of her “ugliness.” And she prays for a miracle—she prays for blue eyes—because she believes that if God grants her blue eyes, she will no longer be ugly, and thus her parents might not “do bad things” in front of her “pretty” blue eyes (45, 46). Because “[l]ove and power are vested in the gaze,” writes Wurmsrer, to “seek forever with the eye and not to find leads to shame.” Pecola’s wish for blue eyes recalls Wurmsrer’s description of the “magic eye,” the use of “eye power” and looking in an attempt to attract the “beckoning, admiring” gaze of the absent mother and thus undo, “by magic expression, the wound of basic unlovability” (Mask 94, 95, 94). Feeling utterly flawed and dirty, Pecola rejects her African-American identity when she imagines that she can cure her “ugliness”—that is, her shame and basic unlovability—only if she is magically granted the same blue eyes possessed by little white girls.

In the story of Pecola, The Bluest Eye depicts not only the interpersonal and internalized shaming of racism but also the horrors of father-daughter incest. But although The Bluest Eye depicts the shameful family secret of an incestuous rape, it also is caught up in a form of denial. Indeed, Morrison has described the rape as “almost irrelevant,” insisting that she wants readers to “look at” Cholly and “see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain.” Cholly’s “embrace, the rape,” in Morrison’s words, “is all the gift he has left” (Tate 164). If Morrison, in writing the novel, found herself thinking the “unthinkable” as she worked out the incest secret that lies buried at the heart of The Bluest Eye (Bakerman 39-40), she also ran into difficulties as she felt the need to provoke reader sympathy for Cholly, despite his incestuous rape of his daughter.

By insisting that the “pieces of Cholly’s life” can be rendered “coherent only in the head of a musician” who can connect together the various fragments of Cholly’s life (159), the narrative invites readers to focus on the connection between Cholly’s fragmented trauma narrative and his rape of Pecola: that is, to understand Cholly’s rape of Pecola the reader must understand Cholly’s traumatic sexual initiation as an adolescent. The fact that Morrison chose to tell the rape from Cholly’s point of view and the fact that Morrison’s narrative, in part, endorses Cholly—for he is, in Morrison’s own description, one of her “salt tasters,” a “fearless” and “lawless” character (see Stepto 19-20; Tate 164-65)—suggests the hidden way in which the novel positions readers not only with the humiliated victim but also with the humiliator, the shamed, enraged father who projects his own shame onto his daughter and thus acts as an unwitting agent in the white society’s humiliation of this vulnerable girl. And if Morrison wants to elicit reader sympathy for Cholly, she also risks shaming her readers as she breaks the taboo on looking and positions her readers as voyeurs of the incest scene.

When Cholly sees Pecola—who assumes the permanent posture of the shamed, traumatized individual with her “hunched” back and her head turned to one side “as though crouching from a permanent and unreceived blow”—he wonders why she looks “so whipped” and why she isn’t happy. Feeling accused by the “clear statement of her misery,” he wants “to break her neck—but tenderly.” “What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him—the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him? … What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How?” (161)

Cholly initially responds to the misery of his shamed daughter with anger, and he also sees her as an object of contempt and disgust. “His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit.” But then, when Pecola scratches the back of her calf with her toe—which is what Pauline did the first time Cholly saw her many years before—the “timid, tucked-in look” of her scratching toe reminds him of the tenderness he once felt toward his wife. Sinking to his knees, he crawls toward Pecola, catches her foot in his hand, nibbles at her many years before

The Bluest Eye presents a disturbing account of Cholly’s rape of Pecola and then partially denies what it has described by insisting in the closure that Cholly loved Pecola even though his “touch was fatal,” for the “love of a free man is never safe” (206). While some critic/readers of The Bluest Eye have remarked on the “raw horror” of the rape scene or have described the rape as a “tremendous and overwhelming act of paternal violence” or have insisted that Cholly’s act is “diabolical” (Miner 88; Holloway 44; Jones and Vinson 30), others have followed the text’s directives by partially denying what Cholly has done or by attempting to exonerate him. Because Cholly has been socially conditioned to view himself as an “object of disgust,” he “can
do nothing other than objectify Pecola,” argues one commentator, and hence he exploits his daughter “because his own exploitation makes it impossible to do otherwise” (Byerman, “Beyond Realism” 59). “At least … he wanted to touch his daughter. Pauline Breedlove responds to the rape by beating Pecola, an act not much less brutal than Cholly’s,” in the view of another commentator (Carman 24). Although most readers would be unwilling to “forgive Cholly for his crime against his daughter,” remarks another commentator, many understand the “why and how” of the rape, which is “a terribly tragic manifestation of a severely skewed upbringing” (Portales 504). If Morrison’s treatment of the rape is said to foreground the reader’s “awareness of the complexity of judgment and feeling” (Dittmar 139), it is also the case that some critics/readers appear to identify with Cholly’s violent act and condemn Pecola. “A profound expression of love, the rape is also an exercise of power and freedom, a protest against an unjust and repressive culture,” argues one critic who also claims that while the defeated and ultimately mad Pecola is “someone to be pitied,” her “ignorance” and “passivity” merit the reader’s “contempt” (Otten 21, 24). Such readers repeat the text by partially denying the horror of Pecola’s plight, and they also, in exonerating Cholly and scapegoating Pecola, inadvertently become caught up in the shame drama presented in the novel.

If, in the rape scene, Pecola is silenced, earlier she poignantly asked, “[H]ow do you get somebody to love you?” (32). Pecola, who feels that she is unlovable, craves the affection of her father only to be raped by him. The utterly helpless and vulnerable daughter and the embodiment of her father’s self-contempt and loathing, the shamed Pecola becomes the target of her father’s humiliated fury. He does to her what has been done to him and thus, when he rapes Pecola, he inflicts on her his own feelings of exposure, powerlessness, narcissistic injury, and humiliation. Pecola’s fainting depicts not only the “somatic reactions” that occur in extreme states of shame—which include physiological responses such as “fainting, dizziness, rigidity of all the muscles” (Wurmser, Mask 83)—but also the physical and mental paralysis experienced by the trauma victim.

Raped by her father and then severely beaten by her mother, Pecola seeks out help from Soaphead Church, a child molester who advertises himself as a spiritualist and psychic reader. When Pecola asks Soaphead Church for blue eyes, he finds her request “the most fantastic and the most logical petition” he has ever received, and he wants the power to help the “ugly little girl asking for beauty” and desiring to “rise up out of the pit of her blackness” (174). In his letter to God, Soaphead insists that he has “caused a miracle,” that he has given Pecola cobalt blue eyes. “No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will,” remarks Soaphead (182). And, indeed, Pecola ends up living permanently in the dissociated world of madness where she talks to her alter identity—her “friend”—about her magical blue eyes. The traumatically shamed Pecola believes that others are fascinated with, and envious of, her blue eyes. But she is, in fact, the subject of gaze avoidance by her mother, who looks “drop-eyed” at her daughter. As Pecola remarks to her alter “friend,” “Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all of the time. Do you suppose she’s jealous too?” Similarly, members of the community look away from the shamed outcast, Pecola, socially ostracizing her with their gaze avoidance. “Everybody’s jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off” (195). Only in her mad world is Pecola someone special, a black girl with the blue eyes of a white girl.

While Claudia and her sister Frieda are initially Pecola’s allies despite their “defensive shame”—for they feel “embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally … sorry for her”—other members of the community pronounce Cholly a “dirty nigger” and insist that the pregnant Pecola carries “some of the blame” for what has happened to her (190, 189). Members of the community, who treat Pecola as the subject of shaming gossip, are “disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited” by Pecola’s story. Her baby, they remark, is “[b]ound to be the ugliest thing walking,” and they feel it would be “better off in the ground” (190, 189-90). But when Claudia thinks about the baby that everyone wants dead, she feels “a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (190). Intent on changing the course of events, Claudia buries the bicycle money she earned from selling seeds and plants the marigold seeds, hoping that God will be impressed enough with her sacrifice so that he will produce a miracle and save Pecola’s baby.

But the baby, which is premature, dies, and the permanently damaged Pecola is socially ostracized. “She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away; children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright.” And Claudia, whose marigolds never grow, ends up avoiding Pecola who spends her days “walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear” and who, with her bent elbows and her hands on her shoulders, flails her arms “like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly” (204). Pecola, who absorbs the “waste” that others dump on her, ultimately becomes the scapegoat for the entire community as they project their own self-loathing and contempt—their own stain of blackness—onto the vulnerable, ostracized Pecola. “All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we
Morrison’s “impetus” for writing *The Bluest Eye*, as she recalls, “was to write a book about a kind of person that was never in literature anywhere, never taken seriously by anybody—all those peripheral little girls” (Neustadt 88). By indicting the community for their scapegoating of Pecola, Morrison also wanted to prompt her readers to recognize their own participation in the smashing of the Pecolas that surround them. Part of Morrison’s intent, as she explains, was to peck away at the “gaze that condemned” Pecola, but she also wanted to “avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to,” and thus she did not want to “dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse” (“Afterword” 210, 211). Yet despite Morrison’s intent, we can find evidence in the critical conversation surrounding *The Bluest Eye* of how the novel involves its readers in a drama of blame-assessment, which, at times, veers into a variation of the blaming and attack-other transactions that sometimes occur in the shame scenario.

Although it has been claimed that “to read *The Bluest Eye* looking to assign blame” is to “miss the point” (Kuenz 430), critics, again and again, have attempted to determine who is responsible for Pecola’s plight. Pecola has been described as a character whose “innocence and tragedy” are presented to readers and as “the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects” (Rosenberg 442; Davis 14). But she also has been characterized as a “scapegoat without benefit of martyrdom,” a hopeless rather than tragic character” and as a “grotesque Messiah,” a character who is “sacrificed so that others may live with the perversions of society” (Otten 24; Byerman, “Intense Behaviors” 452). Pecola has also been described as possibly a “participant and not simply victim, victim and at the same moment participant” in the rape, and as a character who is “responsible, in the final analysis, for what happens to her” because she fails to recognize that she must define a life for herself (Gibson 29; Samuels and Hudson-Weems 15). And yet the victimizing father has often been judged as not fully responsible for his life or actions. Representative of this view is the remark that Cholly, the “victim of earlier, more blatant oppressions,” has “struggled throughout his life against a society that treats him, intentionally or not, without compassion or sympathy” and hence, “almost everything that Cholly does, he does as a reaction to forces and pressures around him” (Portales 499, 503). In yet another common reading, blame is displaced from Cholly onto the black community or the white culture. “Pecola seems less a victim of her father than of a whole community, which has allowed itself to become debased by the dominant culture and alienated by adopting its norms” (Göbel 131). Similarly, the black community “must share the blame for Pecola’s diminishment,” for Pecola has “been made a scapegoat by a neighborhood of people who themselves live their own unnatural lives under the gaze of the dominant culture” (Bjork 53). If Morrison, herself, has sometimes been implicitly condemned for writing a novel that is “mired in the pathology of Afro-American experience” (Dittmar 140), the blame and shame also often attaches to Morrison’s readers. “No one is indicted for Pecola’s destruction,” remarks one critic, “but then in another way we all are” (Demetrakopoulous 36).

“The book … is to ache for remedy,” writes an early commentator on *The Bluest Eye* (Dee 20). This points to yet another common response to the novel, which has provoked a variety of rescue fantasies in its critic/ readers. Pecola “might have been saved if someone had cared enough to nurture her spirit,” writes one commentator, and although it is “too late” for Pecola, Claudia may be rescued as she is prompted “to transcend the enervating image imposed on minorities, to derive strength and momentum from Pecola’s sad example, and to develop a strong self-image, a whole” (Carmean 27, 30). Claudia, in the view of such critic/ readers, “has survived to tell her and Pecola’s story,” and her story “serves as a point of departure in her own search for an authenticating self”; moreover, Claudia creates a tale that, “by negative example, offers corrective possibilities” (Bjork 54; Harris 15). Readers of Morrison’s tale also may undergo a form of rescue. It has been argued that Morrison, by her “foregrounding of the unstable and constructed nature of knowledge, and of the collaborative processes which guide it, affirms the possibility of positive change.” Thus while Morrison’s characters “may not participate in such change,” readers who assemble the text may be empowered, for the novel, by enacting ways readers “produce and re-produce ideology,” reminds them that they “can take charge” of their future (Dittmar 142).

The fact that *The Bluest Eye* can prompt readers to such a variety of responses— to engage in a rescue fantasy or to participate in the drama of blame assessment or to recognize their own guilty and shameful participation in the smashing of the Pecolas of American society—points to the powerful way Morrison works on her readers’ emotions. Repeatedly critics have remarked on the emotional impact of this novel. *The Bluest Eye* has been described as a work that can make readers feel “helpless and afraid” (Dee 20) or as a work that uses
“obscenity” to shock the readers’ “sensibilities,” and that urges readers to see the “destructive absurdity” of American life and to recognize that “the real horrors are still loose in the world” (Byerman, “Intense Behaviors” 456-57). By “exposing the contrast between the ideal and the real,” Morrison’s objective narrator offers the reader “no escape from her anger at the dissolution of black lives” (Bjork 32). In The Bluest Eye, writes another, Pecola is “too vulnerable and uncomprehending to be angry at what happens to her. It is Morrison who is angry, and the careful form of the novel intensifies rather than deflects the reader’s sense of that anger.” Indeed, the “coherence of Morrison’s vision and the structure which parses out its logic into repeating patterns offer the reader no solace, no refuge from Morrison’s anger” (Hedin 49, 50). But to other critics/readers, although Morrison is angry, her narrative provides the reader “solace” and her voice is “regenerative, even in the face of the despair inscribed in the novel’s cyclical structure and wrenching plot” (Dittmar 146).

In writing The Bluest Eye, Morrison recalls that one of the problems she confronted was language. “Holding the despising glance while sabotaging it was difficult. The novel tried to hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt, expose it, then soothe it not with narcotics but with language that replicated the agency I discovered in my first experience of beauty. Because that moment was so racially infused (my revulsion at what my school friend wanted: very blue eyes in a very black skin; the harm she was doing to my concept of the beautiful), the struggle was for writing that was indisputably black” (“Afterword” 211). In The Bluest Eye, Morrison explores black self-contempt—the sense of the self as racially stained, as “dirty” and “nasty” to use descriptions that recur in the text—but in a rich and beautiful language and in a carefully shaped narrative. Using verbal beauty to counteract shame and narrative design as a way of gaining artistic mastery and control over the shame-laden, traumatic subject matter of her novel, Morrison, in The Bluest Eye, explores the woundedness of African Americans, and she does this in an idealized art form that conveys but also contains intense feelings of anger, shame, and pain.