

Excerpt from “Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*” by Debra T. Werrlein Reprinted courtesy of MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the MultiEthnic Literature of the United States”

The *Bluest Eye* explores the contrast between oppressed local culture and innocent national ideal through the friction that erupts between Pecola's life and 1940s models of childhood. Morrison first locates such models in pedagogy by subversively appropriating William Elson and William Gray's nationally recognized Dick and Jane stories. Many of Morrison's critics have commented on her reference to the Elson-Gray primers. Mark Ledbetter explains their importance in literary terms, arguing that they establish a victimless "masterplot" for the novel (28). Nancy Backes points out that the primers offer an ideal that does not exist for anyone (even white middle-class children) (47), while Andréa O'Reilly argues that the books instruct pupils in the ideology of the family (87). According to Gurleen Grewal, primers prime, or make ready, and Morrison shows how they prime black subjects (125). The thread that connects these observations: they all point to ways that the primers contribute to a national ideology of innocence. According to some educators, schools teach more than math, science, and literacy. They reproduce existing class structures, reinforce dominant ideologies, and bolster the political power of the state in capitalism (Aronowitz and Giroux 65). Similarly, Dick and Jane primers not only posit the literary "masterplot" in *The Bluest Eye*; as textbooks in America's public schools, Morrison suggests they posit a national masterplot that defines Americanness within the parameters of innocent white middle-class childhood.