What Links Social Status and Self-Hate?

The Social Theory of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is not only about a deeply personal process of formulating a self-concept, but also about how this process of coming to understand oneself is shaped by the dynamic interplay between self and society. In her novel, Morrison develops a complex social theory about the structure of society and individual self-hate, focusing especially on how those in positions of power can afford to have and exhibit contempt for those lower in social status than themselves, while those on the bottom rungs of society often turn their hatred inward.

In Morrison’s novel, this social theory takes on a distinctly racial element through the central African American characters whose social status and self-image have been molded by their move from the rural Jim Crow South to the industrial North during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. Many of the adult Black characters in the book have moved north to escape prejudice. But what they learn once they have arrived in the North is that they face enormous psychological pressure to trade the heavy White-on-Black racism they escaped for an equally terrible and terrifying Black-on-Black prejudice. Throughout the novel, and in a variety of damaging ways, Black characters turn on one another, inflicting pain both physical and psychic.
This internalized prejudice creates a brutal hierarchy within the African American community whereby those at the bottom of the hierarchy bear the double burden of hate from the White community as well as hate from others in the Black community. There is a sharp divide along lines of wealth and status. For example, we learn that there is a distinct difference between Blacks who own property and Blacks who rent, and that those who are “outdoors,” with no place to go are there irreversibly with no prospects for re-entrance into society. Gossip is used as a powerful tool within the community to distinguish classes and castes from one another and to ensure that members stay within their defined roles. When the Breedlove family is put “outdoors,” the ensuing communal talk about the family ensures that they are relegated to the lowest position possible. Morrison writes:

Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. (19)

This type of judgment passed between members of the community creates a rigid caste system and encourages people to shun, rather than support, those who need help the most.

Meanwhile, the most vulnerable and defenseless characters with the least power turn their hate onto themselves, and for these characters self-loathing becomes a driving life-force. In *The Bluest Eye*, the character with the least power of all is Pecola Breedlove, and the magnitude of her self-contempt has the strength to destroy her self-image completely. Pecola is the youngest and most helpless
member of a family that lives on the outskirts of society. Described as “poor,” “black,” and “ugly,” (38) the Breedlove family is looked down upon by every “respectable” member of the community, and Pecola suffers from discrimination and torment from both her classmates and from other adults. In her home, Pecola struggles to deal with her parents’ constant quarrels, her mother’s bitterness and disdain, and her father’s violent alcoholism. Through Pecola and her interactions with all those higher on the hierarchy, Morrison demonstrates just how closely related self-image and social status often are.

For some Black characters in *The Bluest Eye*, the move north certainly did mean a rise in social status. For these characters, the self-contempt learned while living in the racist South can be unloaded onto members of their new society who occupy a lower place in the hierarchy. This is an important aspect of Morrison’s social theory, and she is unforgiving in her vivid portrait of those in the African American community who use their newly won social esteem to turn against less fortunate Blacks. In one short but significant chapter about two characters who never again appear in the book, for instance, we learn of the type of Black woman from the deep South, “from Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian,” who fosters contempt for other less cultured (and darker) Black women. This type of Black woman is then described as teaching her contempt for less privileged African-Americans to her own children (81). These are the women, Morrison writes, who “hold their behind in,” have a “fear of lips too thick,” and “worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair” (83). They move to Northern cities and learn to view passion, poverty, and above all, Blackness, with scorn. While
these women may believe that what they are doing distinguishes them from the poor, rural, and uneducated among them, they are also teaching themselves and their children to hate other African Americans. One such woman passes these ideas and values onto her son Junior, illustrated by her decision to cut his hair to “avoid any suggestion of wool,” as well as her stated order that forbids him from “play[ing] with niggers” (87).

As it turns out, these “lessons” are not lost on Junior. He clearly absorbs all of them, as we see Junior later tormenting Pecola Breedlove because she is (according to Junior) both “very black” and “ugly” (88). When Pecola is accused of killing Junior’s mother’s beloved cat – despite the fact that it is Junior who hates the cat, and pins the blame for the cat’s injury on the innocent Pecola -- the mother’s composure is completely shattered. Her barely covert prejudices erupt instantly into an explicit insult hurled at a child—“Get out you nasty little black bitch” (94). This woman, as she renegotiates her place in society, has learned to transfer her own feelings of inadequacy onto those who occupy a lower social position than herself, and in doing so she breeds a distinct and tragic kind of intra-communal racism. This is a large part of Morrison’s purpose in this novel: to demonstrate through an extreme case what was in the 1940s when the novel is set a terrible and terribly common occurrence in the African American community, namely, the refusal to stand up for others who have had it worse and were struggling far more as a result.

For characters in The Bluest Eye who fall lower on the social ladder it is not the racism experienced in the South that is the most injurious, but rather the unexpected prejudice encountered from others in the African American community
when they arrive in the North. For Pauline Breedlove, this fact is clearly an impetus for her slide into bitter self-contempt and permanent unhappiness. When Pauline and Cholly first marry and move up North, they are initially full of hope for the prospect of a better life. They ask themselves: “What can go wrong?” (117) But Pauline soon finds that although Northern Whites are different from Southern Whites, “Northern colored folks was different too...no better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no count” (117). Pauline is uncomfortable with the Black women she meets in Lorain, Ohio, who make fun of her un-straightened hair and her country drawl. These women make clear to Pauline that they feel above her in society, and it is not very long before Pauline turns this condescension she feels inward upon (and against) herself and her family. Her only respite and relief from her deep sense of isolation and despair is the movie theater, where she teaches herself (or is taught) that beauty and self-worth are solely to be found embodied by White, blonde-headed movie stars. Pauline quickly becomes obsessed with this silver-screen “scale of absolute beauty” and her life begins to revolve around this dangerous idea (122). Unable to find the beauty in herself, Pauline begins then to see her own children as ugly. She emotionally trades in her life and family for another, preferring to spend as much of her time as she can as a lowly servant in a well-to-do White home. Meanwhile the time she spends with her own children and husband becomes a torment to her.

Pauline's story is emblematic of the way that a changing and racially destructive environment can damage self-concept. While Pauline may have expected that she would be looked down upon by Southern Whites and could easily
chalk it up to the racism pervasive in American culture, she is caught off guard by the prejudices imposed against her by members of her own African American community. Such unexpected hatred forces her to reexamine her self-worth and it ultimately encourages her to conclude that the idea that Blackness is ugly is not a racist viewpoint, but is in fact the literal truth. Her social status forces her to see derision from others as a reflection of herself rather than a reflection of their own prejudices and limited compassion.

_The Bluest Eye_ is a work that is very much about race relations and the impact that they can have on a vulnerable and impressionable individual. Given that the novel centers on many characters that have moved north out of the Jim Crow-era South, one might expect the focus to be on improved self-image as a result of reduced racism. However, this is clearly not the message with which we are presented. Instead, we read about characters filled with anxieties about their race and social status that are ultimately destroyed by their self-loathing. Paradoxically, for these characters, the move away from the overt racism of the Deep South creates even more hate and further damages their self-concept. The tragic situation is a function of women like Pauline Breedlove and the nameless mother who are both victims and perpetrators of a self-imposed system which divides Blacks along lines of class, wealth, and physical appearance. These African-American women then proceed to teach that self-hate to their children while simultaneously feeding them contempt for others. This puts these children in a position where they cannot love themselves and no one else can love them either.
The relationship between power and self-image that Morrison sets up is exemplified in the tragic hero of the novel, Pecola Breedlove. Pecola, as a poor African-American female child is at the very bottom of her society and the disdain she absorbs from others ultimately proves too much for her to bear. Each rung of society transforms its own issues of self-contempt into hate for those on a lower rung, and by the time this ladder of disdain reaches all the way down to Pecola the magnitude of that hate proves to be overwhelming. Unfortunately, then, Pecola becomes a sort of martyr. By the end of the novel, her self-concept is so utterly destroyed by the people around her that she must drop out of society altogether. Morrison's novel can thus be interpreted as a cautionary tale. For Morrison, those without power are in a dangerous and vulnerable position not only because of what others can do to them, but also because of what their status may lead them to do both to themselves as well as those they have been charged to protect and to love.
Work Cited