

NATALIA CZAJKOWSKA
University of Wrocław

Internalization of Negative Images: Self-Loathing as Portrayed in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Geraldine's Case Study

*The black woman had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything.
And out of profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.*

Toni Morrison

Abstract

The article presents the foundations, symptoms and consequences of self-hatred as experienced by Geraldine, the black female character portrayed in Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Primarily, based on the psychological concepts of Rosenberg, Higgins and Horney, it defines self-loathing as an extremely negative self-concept, a depreciation of one's own physical attractiveness, intellect and abilities which is accompanied by anger towards oneself. The key characteristic of this process is expressed by a decreased level of self-esteem that is effectuated by an internalization of negative in- and out-group concepts based on racial prejudice and sexism, as well as on a sense of social rejection and intolerance. An additional reason behind the black woman's conviction of her inferiority and unworthiness is her idealization of white culture, of its standards of beauty and lifestyle with which she is bombarded. In consequence, the black female character tends to overestimate the image of whiteness and to underestimate her blackness. Instead, by being an organic part of the culture that detests her, she learns to hate her dark skin, her poverty, otherness and funkiness. This acquired hatred generates a discrepancy between her actual self and the ideal or ought self, effectuating in a neurotic desire to eradicate all attributes of the actual, despised self. Therefore, Geraldine disparages, doubts and discredits the epitomes of her blackness and bitterly endeavors to eradicate it. To achieve this, she firstly obliterates her native and cultural identity, both in the physical and mental dimension, and secondly she invents a new identity which allows her to escape from her hopelessness and ugliness.

Keywords: black self-hatred, self-esteem, female identity, racism, sexism, negative stereotypes, feminism.

With the emergence, around the 1960s, of women's ethnic fiction in American mainstream literature, the inner life and experiences of women became the central focus of feminist psychological investigation and literary research. The works of Toni Morrison, the first black female writer to be honored the Nobel

Prize in Literature, opened up interdisciplinary discourse on the development of gender, social and cultural identity. These studies emphasized the role of communal perceptions, images, schemes, myths and stereotypes in the formation of the female self. In Morrison's microcosm, the black female identity has always been correlated with pejorative images reinforced by the community. The black female characters of her novels are burdened with two dominant powers – racism and sexism. They are mentally devastated by either white Americans, black males or by other women of the same race. Being marginalized and isolated, they internalize the negative images reinforced by other people and develop scapegoating techniques which ultimately lead to their self-hatred and self-destruction. Arguably, the self-loathing that is presented in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a complicated, multi-aspectual issue. On the one hand, it evolves out of external factors such as the split between white and black cultures, cultural and social incompatibility as well as a sense of alienation produced by racism, sexism and classism; and, on the other hand, it arises from an inner, personal characteristic – that of the black female's lack of emotional capacity to overcome the traumas she has experienced and her inability to fight for her own rights and spiritual independence.

This article, which is based on numerous scientific, social and psychological sources, aims to explain the mechanisms of self-loathing. With a primary focus on Geraldine, who is one of the black female characters depicted in Morrison's first novel, it investigates the course of internalization of negative images and analyzes its effects.

Self-hatred: definition and etiology

According to Morris Rosenberg, the creator of the most popular tool for the measurement of self-esteem, as well as many other theorists, self-hatred is entrenched in low self-esteem resulting from the internalization of other people's negative stereotypes, images and perceptions. An individual's "self-esteem is an open, positive or negative attitude towards self, an active reaction to oneself and a kind of global assessment of oneself" (Rosenberg 1985: 209). High self-esteem implies perceiving oneself as a good, valuable person, whereas low self-esteem signifies dissatisfaction with oneself and a kind of rejection of one's own self (Dzwonkowska 2008: 17). Psychological studies have demonstrated that there are two perspectives by which an individual appraises his or her own self: his or her own or that of significant others (Doliński & Kofta 2006: 575). In other words, the appraisal of significant others is what one thinks that other people think. According to researchers, there are three main fields of self which are evaluated: the actual self, constituting all attributes that an individual believes that he/she possesses or thinks that others believe that he/she possesses; the ideal self, constituting all attributes that an individual wishes to possess or believes that others wish him/her to possess; and the ought self, constituting all attributes that an individual thinks he/she ought to have. A discrepancy between the different states of self always leads to diverse, negative emotions addressed to oneself as well as to mental and social disorders. Self-esteem is closely interrelated with social functioning: it primarily relates to the sense of being accepted, liked and competent (Doliński & Kofta 2006: 580); it is a social indicator, so it implicates current acceptance that is received in the social environment. Self-esteem further indicates the sense of membership in a social group, which is important for an individual. A decrease in self-esteem informs one of social rejection and manifests itself in negative affective states (Wojciszke 2006: 164).

What is crucial to an interpretation of Toni Morrison's text is a psychological report of the differences in the levels of self-esteem between both sexes. Significantly, the highest inconsistency between the level of self-esteem among males and females was documented in the 1960s (Aronson 1969: 108): Afro-American women were found to have lower self-esteem than the group of men in privileged European and American societies. Aronson's research also proves that women, to a greater extent than men, react to a given community's beliefs and opinions, and they determine their own achievements in relation to others. They are also more socially reactive and place heavier emphasis on social feedback (Dzwonkowska 2008: 89). Psychologists assert that people evaluate themselves in two ways, *i.e.* "they expose their independent self, which means that they perceive themselves as a separate, individual being, or the interdependent self, which implies that they identify themselves through interpersonal relationships," in their self-evaluation (Doliński & Kořta 2006: 584). Women tend to expose the interpersonal self and describe their position in a group or community through social and emotional relations with other people. They imagine how they must appear to others, imagine the implications of that appearance and eventually develop their self through the judgments of others. This perspective, based on Charles H. Cooley's social looking glass theory (see also Andersen & Taylor 2007: 95), assumes that the negative images of others more often than not distort our self-concept and clearly contribute to the perceived self-hatred. Karen Horney clarifies how the pride system generates self-loathing:

Briefly, when an individual shifts his center of gravity to his idealized self, he not only exalts himself but also is bound to look at his actual self – all that he is at given time, body, mind, healthy and neurotic – from a wrong perspective. The glorified self becomes not only a phantom to be pursued; it also becomes a measuring rod with which to measure his actual being. And this actual being is such an embarrassing sight when viewed from the perspective of a godlike perfection that he cannot but despise it. (1950: 110–111)

Indubitably, one can observe this mechanism in Toni Morrison's work. The black female figures presented in *The Bluest Eye* who assess themselves from the distorted perspective fail to achieve their idealized selves and underestimate their true selves. Geraldine, an emotionally unbalanced middle-class black woman who is obsessed with the mission of eradicating her African roots, is one of the characters epitomizing the consequences of internalizing other people's oppressive judgments.

The six forms of self-loathing

In Morrison's work one can witness six major ways in which individuals express their self-loathing:

First, self-hatred may result in relentless demands on the self, which are exemplified by the tyranny of the should. The second mode of expressing self-hatred is merciless self-accusation. Thirdly, self-hatred may take the form of self-contempt, which might be expressed as belittling, disparaging, doubting, discrediting, and ridiculing oneself. (Feist 1994: 256)

Indisputably, the key indicators of Morrison's black females' low self-esteem are racism, classism and sexism. They all function as negative attitudes of significant others. Afro-American women such as Geraldine adopt negative images and myths which are reinforced by their own black community as well as by the dominant culture of whites. Acts of racial oppression cause an erosion of their humanity: a loss of their racial dignity, repression of their self-awareness and reconciliation to the untrue identity foisted

on them. As has been found in research studies conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark, as a result of the systematic and historic unfair treatment of black people in the United States, black people “developed contempt for being black and thus sought to be white” (Clark & Clark 1939: 595). The reinforcement of white standards that black people were not able to adhere to contributed to a crisis of their identities and to the eventual invention of a new self-antithetic of their African ancestry. The social science literature concerning the black ego describes this phenomenon as “black self-hatred” and recognizes it as the most extreme identity problem that is central to understanding the behavior of Afro-Americans (Wylie 1974: 122). Many scholars are more than willing to advance the claim that Morrison’s characters “inherit an inferior caste status and almost inevitably acquire the negative self-image that is the realistic ego reflection of such status” (Wylie 1974: 123). They internalize the negative stereotypes reinforced by the mass media, by whites and by their own community and, in consequence, they “develop deeply ingrained feelings of worthlessness” (Wylie 1974: 123) which lead to self-loathing. Black self-hatred is thus defined as an extreme dislike of or being angry at oneself as well as at the whole black community to which one belongs. An in-depth analysis of *The Bluest Eye* reveals the existence of three characters suffering from black self-loathing: Pauline, her daughter Pecola and a walk-on figure, Geraldine. All three schematize the movement as presented above from low self-esteem to self-hatred.

Geraldine’s black self-loathing

Geraldine represents the Afro-American woman who tries to conform to an imposed Western ideal of femininity. For this reason she diminishes her racial roots and wishes to dissociate herself from her blackness by all means. The process of her self-loathing begins with her idealization of white standards and by adopting them into her life. First, she unrestrainedly approves of the radicalized model of beauty that is perpetuated in cultural carriers such as movies, billboards, magazines, books, newspapers, window displays and dolls. This results in a total negation of her true identity. Thereafter she classifies people as either black or blacker and believes in the untidiness and ugliness of Afro-Americans. Subsequently, she gradually and symptomatically starts to hate her own race. Her feelings are manifested in the vehement suppression of anything associated with the stereotyped blackness and African heritage. Toni Morrison names this a “get[ting] rid of the funkiness” (Morrison 1970: 68), which means eradicating all symptoms of African spontaneity, emotionality, sensuality and passion. Having acknowledged her black culture as inferior and disgusting, Geraldine is overwhelmed by the idea of adhering to white ideals: she obsessively straightens her hair, bleaches her skin and controls her gestures and emotions. The semi-white world of cleanliness and discipline gives her an illusionary sense of security. In contrast, the world of blacks symbolizes everything she is afraid of and that fills her with disgust and hate, *i.e.* exclusion, arraignment and contempt. Since she is not able to defend against discrimination, she propagandizes the negative, dysfunctional image of untidy, appalling and worthless black females. Her negrophobia is observable in her public abasement of the little, black Pecola. The supercilious colored female finds the young black girl an easy target of her self-hatred. Indubitably, she manifestly loathes Pecola’s blackness because she associates the color of her skin with dirt and evil. For Geraldine, Pecola is the source of the above-mentioned “funkiness” – the disorderliness of the black spirit and passion she strives to expel. She forbids her bored and isolated son to play with Pecola, for she perceives her as the embodiment of everything she attempts

to erase. This reinforcement of negative images of Pecola and scapegoating is intensified by Geraldine's feeling anxious about the sense of humiliation she sees in the young girl's eyes: "The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between" (Morrison 1970: 92). Accordingly, Pecola epitomizes a symbol of disaster and pain of black people existing in a world of whites. Furthermore, by this illustration Toni Morrison proves that racism and classism exist not only when the person who is subjected to the oppression internalizes the shame and resentment but also when those feelings are released and transmitted to other people. *The Bluest Eye* exhibits how the oppression suffered by one human being elicits self-destruction in other individuals. Indubitably, as a result, Geraldine projects, via her hurtful behavior, onto Pecola the pejorative image of an untidy, ugly, poor, uneducated, ill-mannered and worthless Negro. She continues the vicious circle and takes out her resentment, anger and sense of inferiority on the little black girl. It might be observed that, feeling insecure and incapacitated, she intoxicates others and generates the corrosion of their self-esteem.

When analyzing her behavior from the above-mentioned psychological perspective, it might be stated that she incorporates attitudes, standards and views of significant others (in this case of the dominant culture of whites) and rejects her true self. In effect of the strong loathing of her black origins and in escaping from other Afro-Americans she invents a new form of her own self. Her new identity is a conflation of external white-like features, *i.e.* cleanness, precision, quietness, high morality and good manners (Morrison 1970: 69), on the one hand, and an internal black sense of inferiority on the other. This new form of self affords her all of the social and personal attributes needed to bolster her shallow ego. As a respected "colored" woman, as opposed to a dirty "nigger" (Morrison 1970: 70), she feels more important, accepted and socially stimulated.

Additionally, it should be emphasized that the discrepancy between her actual and ought self contributes to negative emotional consequences, such as anxiety, insecurity, frustration and anger. These destructive emotions distort her social functioning. She is not able to establish positive interrelations with her family and other individuals since she is not ready to accept their otherness; for instance, this inability might be observed in her repeated fits of anger when with her son. Moreover, when interpreting her reactions in accordance with Burkley and Blanton's research, it can be maintained that Geraldine's diminished self-view, as produced by the endorsement of negative in-group images, effectuates her poor parenting skills. Since she is incapable of respecting, loving and indulging herself, she cannot develop and display these feelings towards her baby. Having reserved her tenderness solely for her cat, she willfully neglects her son's emotional needs and limits her parental care to nursing:

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. (Morrison 1970: 71)

As Gloria Robertson observes, Geraldine also transfers her self-hatred to her son Junior (2003: 211). By explaining to him the difference between "niggers" and "colored people" (Morrison 1970: 70), and by forbidding him to meet with other black children, she teaches him to depreciate and ostracize all Afro-Americans. In consequence, her projection of hate and frustration turns against her and the whole black community: Junior abuses black school-girls and truly loathes his mother.

Likewise, the next negative affective state of Geraldine's – her chronic anxiety to conform to the racist and sexist stereotype of the oversexed-black-Jezebel manifesting itself in evasion of any

spontaneous, passionate intercourse – contributes to certain sexual disorders. In an attempt to achieve the ought self, she loathes her body and rejects all sensuous desires that are dictated by it. She disdains and discards sexual satisfaction because, in her mind, it would erode her image of purity and prudishness which she fights to maintain. During a sexual act Geraldine fears to “sway to free” (Morrison 1970: 69), so she exuberates herself only “sparingly and partially” (Morrison 1970: 69). As Morrison’s description of Geraldine’s mechanical sexual intercourse reveals, a sexual act is a source of shame and embarrassment for her:

He must enter her surreptitiously, lifting the hem of her nightgown only to her navel. He must rest his weight on his elbows when they make love, ostensibly to avoid hurting her breast but actually to keep her from having to touch or feel too much of him... [...] She stiffens when she feels one of her paper curlers come undone from the activity of love. (1970: 69–70)

She loathes the very moment in which she is forced to commune with the blackness.

The next consequence of Geraldine’s self-loathing is her compulsive comparing herself with others. On the one hand, she compares herself with white women and white families and, on the other, she continuously compares herself with other members of her own black community. The first attitude effectuates in the above-mentioned comparative inferiority: her actual self viewed from the perspective of a dream of white perfection is embarrassing and deplorable, whereas the former generates a false, pernicious sense of pride and superiority over the so despised “niggers.” She feels that she has gained control and power over them so that she can insult and abuse them with impunity. Additionally, the above-mentioned discrepancy between different states of selves also makes her a prisoner of her new identity; it implies relentless demands of her self and her inability to exceed the self-invented scheme of a “well-behaved,” disciplined colored female.

Ultimately, Geraldine, portrayed by Morrison as a parody of the American Puritan ethic, epitomizes a self-loathing character that is unable to struggle for her own, true identity that would be coherent with her African heritage. She approaches the white American culture and its values uncritically and even does not try to go beyond the perpetuated paradigm. In contrast to Morrison’s other black female characters who experience black self-hatred throughout the novel, she is relatively educated, prosperous and attractive. She has not encountered any traumas and humiliations from the outside world and, theoretically, she could build a positive image of a new generation of Afro-Americans. Instead, because of her suppressed, antisocial behavior, she contributes to her isolation and to the reinforcement of the scoffing, pejorative stereotypes of black society.

Having investigated Geraldine’s self-hatred mechanism, one can conclude that the black female’s self-loathing is one of America’s unresolved traumas. Despite the black liberation campaign calling for the “reclamation of racial beauty,” Afro-American women continue to take their self-value for granted. Facing the negative gaze of the dominant white culture, they perpetuate an assumption of immutable inferiority and thus try to bleach their own selves from the despised blackness.

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