A White Whale: The Suburban Ideal in *Fun Home* and *The Bluest Eye*

The American Dream is a cornerstone of American culture. Since the discovery of the Americas, the promise of fortune and virgin land attracted generations of immigrants. The ambition of these new arrivals coalesced with enlightenment philosophy and westward expansion to form a comprehensive if occasionally inconsistent set of social values. These tenets can be roughly delineated into a collective and individual sense. At a collective level, the American Dream championed democracy, equality and liberty at odds with the more rigid class structure of Europe. Individually, it embodied the promise that anyone could achieve their dream through sheer determination. Akin to the transformation from cheddar cheese to American cheese, that dream became standardized and commercialized. From *Leave it to Beaver* in the 1950s, television besieged Americans with visions of perfect nuclear families living in suburbia. Soon this ideal became the unified dream for all. The vision of a devoted father and mother standing next to two children with a two-story house, mowed lawn and a white picket fence entranced America. The message is clear. In America, anyone can attain this suburban ideal. Failure was an indication of poor character to others and even to one’s self. Thus, this fixation on achieving the suburban ideal leads to self-hatred in those that struggle to achieve it as well as harm to those around them.

The home is a fundamental ingredient of the suburban ideal. The well-manicured lawns and trimmed hedges echo the structured and orderly sentiments of middle class Americans. Bruce Bechdel’s obsession with renovating the mansion reflects his larger desire to conform to the suburban ideal. In *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel*,* Bruce, her father, fanatically works towards reconstructing an old Gothic revival house. Through Bechdel’s imagery, the reader watches as Bruce labors under a Victorian wooden post and fusses over chandeliers. In one memorable scene, he uproots dogwood saplings from private property for the sake of landscaping. Bechdel remarks “I think my father actually enjoyed having a family. Or at least the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. A sort of still life with children” (Bechdel 13). Bechdel elects to label the house an exhibit conjuring the impression of a showpiece in a museum. Bruce’s house is just that, a showpiece, meant to seen by others but not lived in. Thus, for Bruce, his family is merely a means to an end, serving to project the appearance of being a family man. Moreover, the image flaunts his children front and center while Bruce gazes from afar sipping a glass of wine. Therefore, this projection is not intended solely for outsiders but for Bruce’s own psyche, a classic reaction formation. The desire to attain the suburban ideal is so ingrained that Bruce constructs an artificial house and even family.

The identification of the suburban ideal with homes is explored further in *The Bluest Eye*. In Toni Morrison’s novel, Pauline Breedlove is consumed with being the consummate servant to the wealthy white Fisher family. Pondering over how to best better the lives of the Fishers, Pauline devotes herself to continually cleaning, organizing and making blueberry cobbler. “The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers. . . . Power praise and luxury were hers in this household” (Morrison 128). Pauline revels in serving the Fishers because it grants her agency she lacks in her daily life. Being so insignificant in her routine role, she adores the fleeting sense of control. Moreover, heaping praise onto their loyal servant, the Fishers sweeten the pot by according Pauline much-lacked recognition. That the appreciation comes from a picturesque white family makes it all the more potent. Morrison reveals that Pauline used to style her hair like Jean Harlow did, indicative of a greater wish to assimilate to white culture. Thus, her fawning over the Fisher family demonstrates her ingrained urge to realize the suburban ideal. By doting on the Fisher’s daughter and serving with such diligence, Pauline strives to be considered a member of their family. Living vicariously through the Fisher family allows Pauline to achieve the suburban ideal she so desires.

Though both Bruce and Pauline hope to realize the suburban ideal, in practice the matters is not as simple. For example, Bruce’s homosexuality makes the suburban ideal difficult for him to achieve. Despite being married to Helen Bechdel for the length of the memoir, Bruce struggles to repress his inner homosexuality. Bechdel argues that her father renovated the Fun Home not solely to feign the appearance of normality but to hide the Minotaur inside. Representing Bruce’s repressed sexuality, the Minotaur manifested itself through his series of affairs with young boys some of them his students. In one passage, he openly wonders whether his life could have been different. “There’ve been a few times I thought I might have preferred to take a stand. But I never really considered it when I was young. In fact, I don’t think I ever considered it till I was over thirty” (Bechdel 211). Bruce’s marriage and artificial life are the product of societal pressures. However, in spite of conditioned craving of the suburban ideal, it was never fulfilling for Bruce. Although Bruce may have benefitted more from a homosexual relationship, his “fully developed self-loathing” never permitted him to do so (Bechdel 20­­). Thus, the standardization of the American dream prevents Bruce from reaching true contentment. The obsessive worship of a nuclear family and a white picket fence as a universal goal ultimately dooms those on the fringes of society to self-hatred and shame.

Similarly, the suburban ideal fails Pauline Breedlove as well. In her early years in Alabama, Pauline resisted this enforced regularity by not straightening her hair or wearing makeup. Upon progressing north, she begins to experience feelings of self-consciousness. The black women she met privately snickered at her simpler clothes, Southern accent and un-straightened hair. Thus, she became acquainted with the idea of physical beauty. Unfortunately, “In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap” (Morrison 122). Pauline’s infatuation with physical beauty is problematic because she only glimpses it as it pertains to white women. As noted before, she at one time styled her hair like the sex symbol Jean Harlow. However, after losing her front tooth, Pauline concedes that she will never be Jean Harlow and will thus always be ugly. This acceptance of ugliness has deeper ramifications as it represents Pauline’s newfound feelings of self-hatred. As an example, Morrison explains that the Breedlove’s view of themselves prevents them from bettering themselves. The misery and lifelessness of the Breedlove’s apartment illustrate their contempt for themselves. It follows that this self-hatred and thus lack of industry at least at some level stems from Pauline’s inability to realize white beauty standards. If the prevailing culture embraced a definition of beauty that was attainable for blacks, Pauline would not have developed these feelings of ingrained inferiority. Rather, the homogenization of the suburban ideal to be reflective only of white society results in Pauline’s sense of self-hatred.

Unfortunately, her contempt is not restricted to self. Instead, Pauline directs her hatred onto her daughter Pecola. In one incident, Pecola visits her mother at the Fisher’s house. Startled upon hearing that the Fisher’s daughter calls Pauline by her first name not Mrs. Breedlove as even Pecola does, Pecola drops a hot dish of blueberry cobbler that Pauline had made and yelps in pain. Furious, Pauline “abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. . . . The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. ‘Hush, baby, hush . . .’” (Morrison 109). Pauline’s callousness towards Pecola’s pain after being scalded and subsequent tenderness to the Fisher’s daughter is telling. Pauline detests Pecola because Pecola’s mere existence is constant reminder that Pauline is not white. Abhorring the ugliness she sees in Pecola that see also sees in herself, in Pauline’s mind, Pecola’s dark skin is the reason that Pauline will never be able to achieve the suburban ideal. Instead she will forever be black and ugly. On the other hand, Pauline’s devotion to the white Fisher girl is a complete fantasy. By doting on the girl, she imagines herself as a white women like Jean Harlow, respected and deemed beautiful by society at large. Thus, the self-hatred caused by her inability to fulfill this standardized American dream leads Pauline to abuse her own daughter.

Analogously, Bruce Bechdel’s feelings of shame color his relationship with his daughter much as Pauline’s shame colors hers. Fundamentally, Bruce holds a sense of self-hatred and shame with regards to his homosexual identity. However, in an act of Freudian projection, he seems to cast those despised aspects of his identity on to his daughter. In particular, Bruce strives to imprint upon his daughter the sense of femininity he hates in himself. For instance, he repeatedly ensures that his daughter’s clothing is coordinated and in feminine taste. Moreover, when Alison was young child, beginning to realize her differences from most girls, she experiences a sense of recognition and attraction to a lesbian that she notices at a restaurant. Bruce asks Alison “is that what you wants to look like” (Bechdel 119). Ashamed, Alison lies to her father and responds that she does not want to dress like the lesbian. Doing so leads Alison to repress her true identity much as her father did with his. Later, in her life, this “repressed hostility” expresses itself as a series of compulsions (Bechdel 139). For example, Alison ritualizes certain actions like undressing and walking through doorways. These rituals are analogous to her father’s obsession with refurbishing the Bechdel house; they are merely means to contain the Minotaur the person sees within themselves. Alison’s initial rejection of her homosexual identity is fueled by her father’s enforcement of femininity. It is only after accepting her identity that Alison breaks her compulsions. Bruce’s pangs of self-hatred make him unable to handle his daughter’s identity and lead to emotional distress for his daughter.

From a bird’s eye view, Pauline Breedlove and Bruce Bechdel live surprisingly parallel lives. Both are fixated upon attaining the suburban ideal. In particular, Bruce strives to paint himself as an ideal family man for the benefit of others and his own psyche. On the other hand, Pauline lives vicariously through the Fisher family. However, because the suburban ideal is so strictly limited it precludes either Pauline or Bruce from attaining it. In fact, being black means that Pauline can never truly realize white beauty standards. Moreover, Bruce’s homosexuality mean that he will never be satisfied with just a wife and kids. Both of their failures to adhere to the suburban ideal result in self-hatred and shame. This shame becomes destructive when it turns against their children. In the case of Bruce, his feelings of self-loathing prevent him from reaching out to his daughter during a fraught period of her life. More severely, Pauline’s utter self-hatred urges her to abuse her daughter Pecola. This cycle of self-hatred and destruction is perpetuated by an exclusive definition of the suburban ideal. Whereas the American dream may have meant that anyone could achieve their own dream, the influences of mass culture and consumerism have led to a situation where that dream leads to a cycle of destruction.