

“Childhood Cuts Festered and Never Scabbed Over”: Child Abuse in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison revisits one of the main thematic concerns, child abuse and trauma, of her premier novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in her latest book *God Help the Child*. She has actually dealt profusely with all sorts of child maltreatment in her oeuvre. In her recent narrative, Morrison weaves a tangled web of childhood trauma stories, in which all of the characters have suffered some kind of abuse: neglect, witnessing domestic violence, emotional and psychological abuse, molestation, sexual abuse, etc. She shows how the child’s exposure to traumatic experiences has dramatic far-reaching effects into adulthood, such as psychological, emotional, behavioral and social problems. Morrison explores the curse of the past, the legacy of slavery and its aftermath, and its hold on the present, through the phenomenon of colorism. Racism and intra-racial discrimination based on the skin color result in childhood trauma. Children may adopt coping strategies to resist maltreatment or they may internalize oppression and accept self-loathing. Violence generates violence, a vicious cycle which will eventually make the victims future victimizers. Nonetheless, *God Help the Child* is not only about childhood abuse and trauma, but it is also about transformation and healing. Morrison describes the characters’ restorative journeys towards redemption.

Keywords: child abuse, childhood trauma, racism, colorism or shadism, healing

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison has always been truly concerned about children and the way we treat them, which is really important to her. In “Remarks Given at Howard University Charter Day Convocation,” a speech she delivered on March 2, 1995, Morrison asserts:

It’s important to know that nothing is more important than our children. And if our children don’t think they are important to us, if they don’t think they are important to themselves, if they don’t think they are important to the world, it’s because we have not told them. We have not told them that they are our immortality. (1995: 760)

Morrison’s own experiences as a child highlight the paramount importance of protecting children. In an interview with Terry Gross (2015), she tells the story of how her father, who was not a violent man, threw a white man down the stairs thinking he was after his daughters, and how Morrison felt protected:

I think his [Morrison’s father’s] own experience in Georgia would have made him think that any white man bumbling up the stairs toward our apartment was not there for any good. And since we were little girls, he assumed that. I think he made a mistake. I mean, I really think the man was drunk. I don’t think he was really trailing us. But the interesting thing was, A, the white man was—he survived. B, the real thing for me was I thought—I felt profoundly protected and defended [. . .]. So I didn’t think of it as, oh, look, my father’s a violent man. He never, you know, spanked us. He never quarreled with us. He never argued with us. He was dedicated, and he was sweet. So he did this thing to protect his children.

Morrison appears frustrated with the extreme suffering and abuse many children undergo. As Hope Wabuke (2015) writes: “Why do adults hurt children? Why do we, as a society, stand back and let it happen, ignoring our responsibility to do something, anything, to help these most precious little lives? And what can we do to help, if we choose to care?” In her fiction, Morrison emphasizes the need to tackle the appalling phenomenon of child abuse, so it can be prevented. In an interview with Charles Ruas, she says:

Certainly since *Sula* I have thought that the children are in real danger. Nobody likes them, all children, but particularly black children. It seems stark to me, because it wasn’t true when I was growing up [. . .]. Everywhere, everywhere, everywhere, children are the scorned people of the earth. There may be a whole lot of scorned people, but particularly children. The teachers have jobs, no missions. Even in the best schools, the disrespect for children is unbelievable. You don’t have to go to the exploitation, the ten-year-old model and child porn—that’s obvious. Even in the orderly parts of society it is staggering. Children are committing suicide, they are tearing up the schools, they are running away from home. They are beaten and molested; it’s an epidemic. I’ve never seen so many movies in which children are the monsters, children are the ones to be killed. (1994: 103)

Child abuse is at the core of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel. She tells the story of Pecola, a girl that succumbs to insanity after the terrible maltreatment and abuse she goes through in her family and community. In fact, child abuse, racism and long-standing victimization, both domestic and communal, have been dealt with extensively in Morrison's oeuvre. Her latest narrative, *God Help the Child*, which echoes her premier work, revisits the evils of child molestation, neglect and abuse: "In that novel, too, children bear the brunt of all of society's illnesses, the truest victims of poverty and racial prejudice" (Umrigar, 2015). Thus Morrison exposes the damage adults (family, community and the society in general) inflict upon children and the lasting impact it has on their lives, and how "[w]hat you do to children matters. And they might never forget" (Morrison, 2015: 43). As she explains to Carol Off in *As It Happens*, a Canadian interview show, "in this book, I [Morrison] was very interested in childhood trauma paralyzing us in the contemporary world" (2015). However, Morrison is also interested in figuring out ways to actually heal from the horrors of the past. She shows us how her characters confront their pain and suffering and reclaim their lives. *God Help the Child* is a tale of childhood abuse and trauma, but it is also a tale of healing and redemption.

2. Childhood Abuse and Trauma: "Violence Begets Violence"

Violence, as a whole, is central to the African American experience. Blacks have suffered all kinds of victimization and oppression, alienating them from their own culture. As Cathy Spatz Widom contends, "violence begets violence" (1989: 160). The intergenerational transmission of violence brings about childhood trauma and maltreatment. Children and youth in the United States experience an alarming rate of exposure to violence and molestation, a phenomenon that is even higher for black individuals. According to *Childhelp* (2017), every year child protection agencies receive more than 3.6 million child abuse referrals, which involve more than 6.6 million children (a referral can include multiple children). The United States has one of the worst records among industrialized nations: an average of between four and seven children suffer child abuse and neglect every day. Studies by David Finkelhor, Director of the *Crimes Against Children Research Center*, show that 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys is a victim of child sexual abuse, 20% of adult females and 5-10% of adult males recall a childhood sexual assault or sexual abuse incident (*The National Center for Victims of Crime*, 2012). The exact numbers are difficult to determine because child sexual abuse is often not reported. According to a 2012 UNICEF report, the United States was ranked seventh out of 10 countries that represent more than half of all child homicides (*UNICEF*, 2014: 37). Reported abuse and crimes do not often account for many of the other horrors that children face: racism, insults, neglect, guilt, etc.

Before the mid-19th-century, child abuse was a socially unspeakable phenomenon. In the 1960s, C. Henry Kempe and his colleagues identified and recognized 'child abuse,' creating awareness and exposing its reality. They conceptualized the "battered-

child syndrome,” which characterizes the clinical manifestations of severe physical abuse in young children. By the 1970s, doctors started to work on the detection of child abuse, and in 1974, Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), which provides support for the prevention, assessment, investigation, prosecution and treatment of child abuse. The concepts of child abuse and neglect depend on cultural values and beliefs about appropriate childrearing and parenting. The World Health Organization (1999) defines child abuse in the following terms: “Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power” (Butchart et al., 2006: 9).

Child abuse is a global problem. It can be a single incident, but it is usually constant in time. According to James Garbarino, what is truly harmful is the chronic pattern that “erodes and corrodes a child” (qtd. in Palusci & Fischer, 2010: 144). Hence, traumatic stress occurs when children or adolescents are exposed to a long-term abuse or traumatic situations, and this exposure overwhelms their ability to cope with these experiences. It can take many forms: neglect or negligent treatment, emotional/psychological, physical or sexual abuse, witnessing or experiencing family violence, other adverse childhood situations. Children often suffer from damaging behaviors of different categories of abuse (Higgins, 2004). The type of abuse as well as the duration of the child’s exposure to traumatic experiences determine the long-term effects of these into adulthood (Higgins & McCabe, 2000). Child abuse not only occurs in a variety of forms, but also is deeply rooted in cultural, economic and social practices.

Children are ill-treated by people who have some power over them. They are weak, so they can be easily oppressed psychologically or physically. They become, per excellence, the victims of scapegoating. Child abuse can be perpetrated by the family or someone from the community, when trust has an important role, or even from other people. Children are completely dependent on their parents or caregivers. Their world revolves around them, as they are the primary source of love, safety, nurturance, encouragement, acceptance, positive attention, support, etc. Even though most parents want the best for their offspring, some of them may emotionally, psychologically or even physically harm their children because of stress, poor parenting skills, social isolation, racial self-loathing, lack of available resources, etc.; or because they were also victims of abuse.

When a child is hurt by his/her primary caregivers, the violation of the trust at the core of the infant’s relationship with the world dramatically increases the level of trauma that the victim endures. Domestic violence is greatly influenced by the community and histories of the family members. Children who grow up in dysfunctional families are more prone to suffer from a range of psychological, emotional and social problems, which will last in their adulthood. As John Briere (1992) argues, neglect and abuse, sexual or not, at home, as well as witnessing and

experiencing family violence have been linked with subsequent psychological disturbances:

Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness. (Herman, 1992: 96)

Domestic violence can lead to the child having difficulty in maintaining relationships, or to having unhealthy relationships in their lives due to fear of being controlled or abused. In addition, as Eve Buzawa claims, “[c]hildren in abusive families appear to be the more susceptible to the impact of domestic violence [. . .]. Exposure to family violence apparently is associated with the development of positive feelings towards using violence to ‘solve’ problems and hence indirectly to violent offending” (2003: 23-26). Consequently, children who are exposed to domestic violence may become dysfunctional members of society.

Domestic violence in African American families can be traced back to the days of slavery and the inhuman treatment blacks received from their white masters. For both black males and females, slavery was a devastating experience. And yet, black women were doubly oppressed because of their race and gender, especially dramatic is the abuse black female children faced inside and outside their home. bell hooks believes that male supremacy encourages the use of abusive force to keep domination of females in the family. The Western philosophical notion of male coercive rule is linked to all acts of violence, especially those against women and children, “between the powerful and powerless, the dominant and the dominated” (2015: 118). Abused or damaged children may develop coping strategies to resist maltreatment or they can internalize oppression and feel unworthy and accept self-loathing. This is a vicious cycle in which the victims will eventually become victimizers.

3. Lula Ann's Childhood: Shadism and Parental Neglect

God Help the Child “is a novel rooted in the real world of violence, prejudice, and abuse” (Umrigar, 2015). John Strawn (2015) thinks that “Morrison’s title riffs on the Billie Holiday song, ‘God Bless the Child,’ conjuring the great singer, whose own life was filled with the kinds of abuse and mistreatment the very timbre of her voice laid bare.” In her latest novel, Morrison deals profusely with the atrocities of child abuse. Nearly every character is a witness or a primary/secondary victim of molestation, sexual assault, emotional or psychological abuse, neglect, etc.

In historical terms, the horrors of slavery and its legacy resonate in the struggles of the lives of Morrison’s traumatized characters: “The scars inflicted on Bride and Booker by their childhoods are metaphors of sorts for the calamities of history and the

hold they can exert over a country's or a people's dreams" (Kakutani, 2015). Morrison stresses how the abuse and neglect suffered during infancy result in psychological impaired adults: "[C]hildhood wounds [. . .] leave a lasting mark, even into adulthood [. . .]. *God Help The Child* is about young adults still healing from wounds inflicted during their childhood by parents or predators" (Gross, 2015). According to Kara Walker, "childhood is the perfect condition to be manipulated by adult power because it is self-perpetuating. Children become adults and carry with them a trauma imprinted on the body and memory" (2015).

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison emphasizes how family's dysfunctionality strongly affects children's identity and their relationships with the community and the society in general. Lula Ann Bridewell is "mistreated as a child by her light-skinned mother" (Strawn, 2015). The oppressive institution of patriarchal motherhood often exerts violence against children, which can be manifested in child neglect and abuse (O'Reilly, 2004: 8). Lula Ann's mother, Sweetness, a light-skinned black, "with good hair, what we call high yellow," (3) has "been poisoned by that strain of color and class anxiety still present in black communities" (Walker, 2015), the legacy of slavery and its aftermath. Sweetness feels terribly embarrassed and scared of her baby's "[m]idnight black, Sudanese black" skin (3). She feels revulsion when she nurses her daughter and considers giving her away to an orphanage or even killing her.

Domestic violence can be expressed by means of various types of maltreatment, which can be characterized as acts of commission and omission. Act of commissions involve actual abusive behavior toward the child (Briere, 2002: 1), which can be physical, sexual or even psychological, resulting in longstanding traumatic effects and psychological disorders in the child. On the other hand, the acts of omission most typically consist of psychological neglect, which "generally refers to sustained parental nonresponsiveness and psychological or physical unavailability, such that the child is deprived of normal psychological stimulation, soothing, and support" (Briere, 2002: 1). Sweetness's toxic parenting is an example of emotional abuse, as in Douglass J. Besharov's definition: "[A]n assault on the child's psyche, just as physical abuse is an assault on the child's body" (1990: 9), with mostly acts of omission.

Sweetness fails to provide her daughter Lula Ann with an appropriate and supportive environment, since she transfers the contempt she feels for her own race to her child: "Parents unwittingly pass hatred to their children, thereby 'reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over'" (Sacks, 2015). Her life and parenting are inordinately impacted by a racially-prejudiced society. Her

fear of producing a dark black baby, muses on the 20 per cent of white people who have 'Negro' blood running in their veins, the legacy of slavery—in this, the 150th anniversary of its abolition in the US. The fault lines of contemporary racism are ever-present, but the complexity of racism internalized by African Americans is also there. The impact of that secondary hierarchy of racism is the backbone of Lula Ann's story. (Iqbal, 2015)

Morrison explores the curse of the past and its hold on the present. She critiques society's racism and the black community's intra-racism, which engender child abuse

and trauma. Racism and its expression, colorism or shadism, are an integral part of Lula Ann's reality as a black abused girl. Lillie Fears defines colorism as a pattern of interaction between African Americans in which those light-skinned reject the darker ones and, as a reaction, dark-skinned blacks criticize light-skinned ones as not being "black enough" (1998: 30). Morrison remarks that, in her latest novel, she wanted to separate color from race. In *God Help the Child*, she tackles the privileges of having a light skin:

Distinguishing color—light, black, in between—as the marker for race is really an error: It's socially constructed, it's culturally enforced and it has some advantages for certain people. But this is really skin privilege—the ranking of color in terms of its closeness to white people or white-skinned people and its devaluation according to how dark one is and the impact that has on people who are dedicated to the privileges of certain levels of skin color. (Gross, 2015)

Victims of colorism become victimizers. Sweetness's destructive patriarchal mode of motherhood transmits racist ideologies and attitudes. Her self-hatred makes her unable to hand down a positive racial image to her daughter. Her strictness and lack of affection destroy Lula Ann's sense of self. And yet, Sweetness wants to believe that she was trying to protect her child from a racist society. We can see her feelings of guilt when she attempts to convince herself that she was not a bad mother. Her words, at the beginning of the narrative, "[b]ut it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not" (7), are revealing. Her feelings of guilt are concealed beneath her patriarchal toxic motherhood.

Sweetness excuses the lovelessness in raising her daughter on the challenging circumstances black individuals had to live at the time. Despite recognizing her lack of maternal love and nurture, she does not take full responsibility for the damage and pain she has inflicted on Lula Ann. Notwithstanding, as Roxane Gay (2015) pinpoints, "it is difficult to judge Sweetness's choices. She should know better, but is painfully clear her choices have been shaped by the realities of being black in a white world—a world where the lighter your skin, the higher you might climb."

Sweetness believes Lula Ann's blue-black skin will be her cross, so she has to protect her daughter from society's racial prejudice, "to prepare [her] [. . .] for the malicious slurs her black skin seemed certain to summon" (Strawn, 2015). Apparently, her intentions are to teach Lula Ann coping skills so she can survive people's cruel racism, which Sweetness has also experienced, as an observer, in her life. She recalls witnessing a group of white boys bullying a girl, almost as black as her daughter. Nevertheless, it seems more likely that Sweetness, at least in part, neglects her maternal duties so as not to confront the rejection of society. She does not want other people to know that Lula Ann is her daughter. That is why Sweetness tells the girl to call her by her name, instead of "Mother" or "Mama." She does not take her out much afraid of people's reactions at seeing the black baby. Neither does she attend school events.

Colorism has negative effects on children's overall life outcomes in relation to emotional and psychological well-being, self-concept, self-esteem and identity

formation. The impact of shadism on Sweetness and Lula Ann, as victimizer and victim, is appalling. Sweetness's constant rejection of her daughter as a result of her skin color is the most insidious form of emotional abuse. Danya Glaser considers that emotional abuse can be "more strongly predictive of subsequent impairments in the children's development than the severity of physical abuse" (2002: 698-699). Lula Ann remembers how Sweetness avoided touching her dark skin, "[d]istaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me" (31). She consciously misbehaved so her mother would chastise her. However, Sweetness found ways to punish her without touching her. Lula Ann is happy the day her mother slaps her when she stains her bed sheets with her first menstruation.

Children who are constantly ignored, shamed, terrorized and humiliated suffer as much, or even more, than those who are assaulted or exposed to physical abuse. In *God Help the Child*, Sweetness, with her ironic name, rears Lula Ann without any affection. Her acts have an adverse effect on her daughter's emotional health and development as a child. As Sam Sacks (2015) states, "[c]hildren are most vulnerable to the 'death of self-esteem' [. . .] and black girls in particular are likely to be imprinted with a sense of racial and sexual self-loathing." Sweetness's habitual emotional and psychological maltreatment severs the mother-daughter bond. Lula Ann misses her unavailable and unresponsive mother. She remembers how, as a child, she used to hide behind a door to hear her mother hum some blues songs, which she would have loved to share with her. Besides, Lula Ann grows up alone with her mother, as her father, Louis, abandons them both when she was just a baby. Owing to his daughter's dark complexion, Louis thinks that Sweetness has cheated on him, and he cannot bring himself to love her. And yet, fathers and fathering are part of the nurturing that guarantees children's psychological growth: "[T]here must be shared responsibility [both parents], for the child to begin to approach wholeness" (Samuels & Hudson-Weems, 1990: 75).

Everyone around Lula Ann is also "implicated in an endless web of mistreatment" (Strawn, 2015). During her infancy, Lula Ann, desperately needed of love, falsely testifies against a teacher, Sofia Huxley. She is a third-grader and, in collusion with her classmates, she accuses the white woman of being a child molester "to get the attention of her mother, whose 'abuse' takes the form of a far more insidious lovelessness" (Pistelli, 2015). The untruthful accusations of child abuse destroy Sofia's life, for fifteen years, Sofia suffers contempt or even violence from the other inmates, as "[h]urting little children was their idea of the lowest of the low" (66). Furthermore, even when she is finally released from prison, she cannot get near children. Moreover, she is shunned by her husband and parents, as "[i]n their world of God and Devil no innocent person is sentenced to prison" (68).

As a witness in the trial, Lula Ann "is both an agent of destruction—as a child, she had falsely fingered Sofia for participating in the sexual abuse of young students—and a victim" (Strawn, 2015). Bereft of maternal love, she recalls how Sweetness was "kind of motherlike" the day she points at Sofia. She smiled at Lula Ann and even held her hand when they left the courthouse, which she had never done before. At school, Lula Ann is called or shouted at bad names, ape sounds or monkey mimicry: "They treated

me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper” (56). Lula Ann learns her mother’s lessons and grows a thick skin: “So I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through [her] veins, with no antibiotic available [. . .] buil[ding] up immunity so tough that not being a ‘nigger girl’ was all [she] needed to win” (57).

The racial self-contempt that Sweetness inculcates in her daughter does not allow her to have a sense of belonging or identity: “Sweetness’s horror at her daughter’s ‘blue-black’ color and ‘too-thick lips’ has saddled Bride [Lula Ann] with a crushing load of insecurity and guilt” (Sacks, 2015). Lula Ann has to struggle her whole life for self-definition, trying to protect herself from being hurt. At the age of sixteen, she drops out of school and flees home. Lula Ann changes her “dumb countrified name” and calls herself Bride, reinventing herself. She runs a prosperous cosmetics business and leads a glamorous life. Like Jadine in *Tar Baby*, “Bride is shallow, emotionally stunted, and enamored of the glitzy professional world she lives and works in” (Umrigar, 2015). She “stitch[es] together: personal glamour, control in an exciting even creative profession, sexual freedom and most of all a shield that protect[s] her from any overly intense feeling” (79). Emotionally abused children often grow up believing that they are deficient in some way. As an adult, Bride finds, ironically, vengeance from her tormenting childhood ghosts in her alluring blackness and in her successful career.

God Help the Child is “about young adults still healing from wounds inflicted during their childhood by parents or predators” (Gross, 2015). Healing the deep scars of child abuse is a complex and harsh process. To get through childhood trauma is necessary to connect to other people and finally tell someone about your traumatic experiences. Booker Starbern, Bride’s boyfriend, is the only one she has been able to spill her guts to. She confides everything to him: “every fear, every hurt, every accomplishment, however small” (53). Bride thinks she has gotten over all that and moved on, but she realizes that while talking to him all those repressed buried memories of her childhood sufferings come up “fresh as though [she] was seeing them for the first time” (53).

Bride discloses to Booker that, as a child, she witnessed how Mr. Leigh, their landlord, raped an anonymous little boy. When he saw Bride, who was only six years old, he called her, “little nigger cunt!” (55). Although she had never heard the words before, she felt the hate and revulsion they carried with them. Bride wonders if when she accused Sofia Huxley, she was really pointing at the idea of Mr. Leigh: “His nastiness or the curse he threw at me?” (56). The emotional toll on children who witness threats or violence of any kind against others can be considerable. Secondary victims, witnesses, often experience the effects of trauma, sometimes with the same symptoms of those of the primary victims. Figley and Kleber define “a secondary traumatic stressor” as “the knowledge of a traumatizing event experience by a significant other” (1995: 79). It is true that Bride does not watch the rape of a family member or a relative, but watching the rape of a little boy can really trigger sympathy and empathy from another child.

When Bride told her mother, she got furious and instructed her daughter not to say anything about the rape, because she was worried about keeping an apartment that was in a safe location. Thus the criminal offence got unpunished. Pressure from family members to remain silent about a sexual assault can be very damaging for the secondary victim/witness, especially when they are children, as they may feel responsible for the harm done. When Bride confesses her long-kept secret, her eyes are burning and her tears welled. Booker just says: “Now five people know. The boy, the freak, your mother, you and now me. Five is better than two but it should be five thousand” (55). Even as an adult, Bride feels the guilt and shame at not having done anything regarding the rape. Only by speaking about it, she experiences relief. For those who have witnessed sexual assaults, being listened to and believed can be extremely invigorating and curative.

4. Bride’s Search for Self-Definition: Web of Childhood Trauma Stories

Bride, as an adult, wants to reclaim control over her life by confronting the past. To heal from her feelings of guilt or self-blame for lying about Sofia Huxley, she decides to visit her former teacher the day she is released from Decagon Women’s Correctional Center, the prison where Sofia has spent the last fifteen years. For a year Bride plans it carefully. She brings the ex-con money and some gifts. Her attempt to make amends, an act devoid of true kindness and sympathy, does not go the way she expects. Sofia beats her to the point that Bride needs reconstructive plastic surgery. This encounter triggers the abrupt departure of Booker, who rejects her, “You not the woman I want” (10), and runs away.

Like Bride, Booker also struggles with a childhood trauma. He is a “tortured black trumpet player [. . .] who has his own dark past regarding child abuse. Booker’s elder brother, who he worshipped, was murdered by a pedophile, a serial killer, when the two were kids, a tragedy to which Booker has clung” (Shriver, 2015). Thus, Booker is a secondary victim, who is deeply affected by a sexual assault in his family and its aftermath. The murder of his brother, Adam, breaks his heart, and his happy tight-knit family crushes as a result of it. Morrison vividly evokes Booker’s idolized older brother, whom he saw last time skateboarding down the sidewalk in twilight, “Adam floated, a spot of gold moving down a shadowy tunnel toward the mouth of a living sun” (115). After his brother’s death, Booker’s father refuses to play any music. Very despondent, Booker feels that living without Louis’s trumpet is too much, so he asks his father if he could take trumpet lessons. Music is one way Booker copes with the trauma that Adam’s loss represents in his life. That is why he gets rid of his trumpet at the end of the book when he no longer needs it.

After months of his disappearance, Adam is found. Booker and his father identify his filthy, rat-gnawed body with no pants or shoes. Adam was more than a brother to Booker, “[h]e was the one who knew what Booker was thinking, feeling [. . .] the smartest one who loved each of his siblings but especially Booker” (115-6). His elder

brother had replaced the twin brother he has never met. Adam's murder leaves him alone. Then, after six years, when Booker is fourteen, Adam's killer, Mr. Humboldt, is caught and convicted of the sexually stimulated slaughter (SSS) of six boys, whose names were tattooed across his shoulders. Booker is as distressed about the murderer's sentence, as he was about Adam's demise. His desire for vengeance makes him think that Mr. Humboldt's execution is too a facile solution, and he imagines scenarios, in which he has to suffer endlessly. He remembers an African tribe that lashed the dead body to the back of its murderer. Booker believes that justice would be served if, in conjunction with public shame and damnation, the criminal carried a physical burden.

When Booker thinks about the pervert, he realizes how normal-looking he was, "[p]robably an otherwise nice man—they always were. The 'nicest man in the world,' the neighbors always said. 'He wouldn't hurt a fly.' Where did that cliché come from? Why not hurt a fly? Did it mean he was too tender to take the life of a disease-carrying insect but could happily ax the life of a child" (111). Sexual child molesters or offenders are not usually the stereotypical low-life individuals people imagine. There is no generic profile: They "cut across economic, social, and educational lines. They may be rich or poor, well-educated or ignorant, blue-collar or white, married or single" (qtd. in Kelly, 1985: 1021). Adam's killer was a retired auto-mechanic, who did home repairs. He had a welcoming, attractive smile and always traveled with a cute little dog, called "Boy," which he used to lure children. Sexual offenders normally gain access to their victims through deception and enticement. The Gothic details of Mr. Humboldt's atrocities include molestation and torture, and even conducting some amputations on the children. He even kept the boys' small penises in a decorated candy tin.

At Adam's funeral, Booker misinterprets the words of his wise and eccentric aunt Queen, who trying to comfort him, tells him to mourn his brother as long as he needed, the validation for "the unfairness of the censure he was feeling from his family" (117), and for making Adam's death his own life. From then on, Booker adopts a moral position from which he can identify other people's signs of imperfection. He gets a tattoo of a small "orangish" rose on his shoulder, as the one he threw at his brother's coffin.¹ Booker is incapable of understanding or forgiving his family, who try to move on after the tragedy: "How could they pretend it was over? How could they forget and just go on?" (117). Booker leaves them and goes away. His traumatic recollections consume his whole life afterwards.

Booker is so distressed and afflicted by what happened to his brother that he becomes a defender of sexual abuse victims and a punisher of their victimizers, a sort of "superhero," "Batman," as his previous girlfriend Felicity calls him. Booker seems to seek to right the wrongs of those who abuse or maltreat children in different ways. He beats a stranger, who was masturbating at the sight of the faculty children, in a university campus playground. Booker thinks of how

[o]bviously the sight of the children was as pleasurable to the man as touching them because just as obviously, in his warped mind, they were calling to him and he was answering their plump thighs and their tight little behinds, beckoning in panties or shorts as they climbed up to the slide or pumped air on the swing. (109)

On another occasion, Booker witnesses a situation of child abuse. He sees a couple that is exposing their baby to illegal drug activity. They are sucking on a crack pipe, while a two-year-old infant is screaming and crying in the backseat of their parked car. Booker attacks the man, and then the three of them have a fight. They all get arrested and the baby girl is given to childcare services.

Like Son in *Tar Baby*, Booker “is [. . .] unable to function in the real world, but grounded and in touch with his ancestral roots” (Umrigar, 2015). He meets Bride, his ““midnight Galatea,”” when he is still “trying to comprehend the emotional levy exacted by the murder of his beloved older brother” (Strawn, 2015). When Booker first sees her, he feels “the disintegration of the haunt and gloom in which for years Adam’s death had clouded him” (132). Bride and Booker are made for each other: “The many parallels between Bride and Booker’s lives—including childhood trauma, and direct or indirect confrontations with accused child molesters—underscore how much they share” (Kakutani, 2015). Booker is mesmerized by Bride’s obsidian blackness and they become lovers. The couple has an argument when he learns that she wants to pay a visit to Sofia, whom he believes is a child molester. Booker finally abandons her “to cope with his own lurid childhood trauma, the murder of his brother” (Sacks, 2015).

After Booker’s departure, Bride “begins to unravel both physically and emotionally; her miserable, loveless childhood begins to resurface” (Anrig, 2015). Even though she tries to put the pain she has suffered in childhood behind her, her breakup with Booker and being beaten by Sofia Huxley make her feel “[d]ismissed” and “[e]rased” (38). She believes that she is undergoing a physical regression “back into a scared little black girl” (142). Morrison uses magical realism, Bride’s inexplicable body changes (losing her pubic and underarm hair, her breasts and her ear piercings; even shrinking to the size of a child) to express the black woman’s identity crisis.²

Bride realizes how her self-confidence was just a “thrilling successful corporate woman façade of complete control” (134). She also becomes aware of the superficiality of her world: “[S]he had counted on her looks for so long—how well beauty worked. She had not known its shallowness of her own cowardice the vital lesson Sweetness taught and nailed to her spine to curve it” (151). Bride cannot pretend to be a self-reliant woman anymore. She is haunted by Booker’s last words, and only the stroke of his shaving brush soothes her. Bride’s life is crumbling down and she seeks solace in drugs, drinking and sex.

Ultimately, Bride decides to find Booker and face him, “which was the same as confronting herself, standing up for herself” (98). She sets out on a restorative identity quest for self-forgiveness and self-definition, a journey “both literal and metaphorical—that involves the laying of old ghosts to rest for both of them” (Scholes, 2015). Her search takes Bride to the woods of northern rural California, symbolically her inner self, where she wrecks her car and needs to convalesce with an old hippy couple, Steve and Evelyn. Bride’s glamorous, materialistic and superficial view of life comes up against their anti-capitalist ideals, their simple and more real way of living, “a point of intersection between atomistic cultures” (Sturgeon, 2015). The couple’s austere existence makes her wonder: “What did she know anyway about good for its own sake,

or love without things?" (92). During her recovery, Bride has time to ponder about her life, and how "she had been scorned and rejected by everybody all her life" (98).

Bride's rendezvous with Queen makes her feel as if she had been stripped of her beauty and glamour and taken back to the past when she was "the ugly, too-black little girl in her mother's house" (144). Booker's rational words about race, when she was complaining about Sweetness's hatred for her black skin, comes to her mind:

'It's just a color,' Booker had said. 'A genetic trait—not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin.'

'But,' she countered, 'other people think racial—'

Booker cut her off. 'Scientifically there's no such thing as race, Bride, so racism without race is a choice. Taught of course, by those who need it, but still a choice. Folks who practice it would be nothing without it.' (143)

Queen's life also exemplifies child neglect: "[S]he abandoned some of them [her children] to marry other men. Lots of other men. And she didn't or couldn't take the kids with her. Their fathers made sure of that" (169). According to Booker, all of Queen's offspring hated her for different reasons. As a young woman, Queen thought that being pretty was enough, but it was not, a lesson she learnt too late for her children. She married multiple times, and her "husbands" took all of her babies. She could not raise any of them beyond the age of twelve. Despite having a lot of children, Queen lives alone in the wilderness, and she has no close relationship with any of them. She just has their photographs to look at.

Queen is also responsible for not protecting her daughter Hannah from the sexual abuse inflicted on her, while she was under her care. At the hospital, Queen, who is badly burned and drugged, mistakes Bride for Hannah, and starts talking to her about her life. Rumor in the family has it that Queen had dismissed the girl's complaint about her father, whom she said fondled her. However, her mother did not believe her. Hannah, like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, suffers from sexual abuse at the hands of primary caregivers. Denial by family members of a victim, who has been exposed to sexual abuse, can have extremely profound negative effects on the child, and can lead to the annihilation of families. After the sexual maltreatment, "[t]he ice between them [Queen and Hannah] never melted" (170). Queen fails some of the main tasks of motherhood: she does not keep her daughter safe, does not acknowledge the sexual abuse or support her afterwards.

Queen quite never forgives herself for her negligence. As Figley and Kleber contend:

Nearly all publications focusing on people confronted with extreme stress events exclude those who have experienced the event indirectly or secondarily and concentrate on those who were directly traumatized (i.e. the "victim" or "survivor"). Yet, diagnostic descriptions of what constitutes a traumatic event [. . .] clearly suggest that mere knowledge of the exposure of a loved one to a traumatic event can be traumatizing as well. (1995: 77)

Figley and Kleber call “secondary traumatic stressor” the behaviors and emotions that result from the knowledge of the traumatizing event (1995: 78). “Vicarious or secondary traumatization” refers to the ripple effects of sexual abuse and assault that affect other people that are close to the victim of the traumatic event, such as his/her family, friends, colleagues, community or even the wider society. According to Jennifer Foster, parents of victims of sexual abuse have to cope with their reactions to the abuse, such as anger, self-blame and feeling overwhelmed (qtd. in Fuller, 2016), along with feelings of confusion, anxiety, depression, numbness or shock, common symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A feeling of failure is the prevailing long-term response of non-offending parents, usually the consequence of a sense of guilt at not realizing what was happening and stop it. Parents’ denial aggravates the situation, as they would not provide support after their children’s disclosure. The photo display Queen has at her house, most of them Hannah’s photos, are “[m]ore like a memorial than a gallery” (171), which exposes her grieving and guilt. Like Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*, Queen fails to protect or support her daughter when she confesses that she has been molested by her father, of which she repents until the final hours of her life.

In California, Bride also meets an emotionally wounded foundling child, Rain, who an old hippy couple, Steve and Evelyn, have taken in. Rain “has known her own brand of torment” (Gay, 2015). She has suffered from sexual molestation and abuse. Rain was prostituted by her own mother, and never met her father. She is sexually exploited since she is a little girl. Rain remembers how an old man hurt her so badly that she bled. Sexual abuse is appalling if it occurs at the hands of someone the child knows and trusts, close relatives or caregivers, but it is also really monstrous if it is accepted and allowed by them. Sexual molestation is especially traumatic for the victim because of the guilt and shame that usually accompany it. The emotional component is powerful and pervasive. The repercussions of prolonged child sexual abuse are devastating: low self-esteem, a feeling of worthlessness, an abnormal or distorted view of sex, withdrawn, depression, suicidal wishes, etc.

At the age of six, Rain’s mother kicks her out after she injures a man, one of her regular costumers, who was molesting the girl. She bit his penis when he stuck it into her mouth. Homeless children and youth, also called “unaccompanied youth,” live on the streets unsupervised, deprived from parental, foster or institutional care. Rain’s account of her tough street life manifests her courage and resilience:

You had to find out where the public toilets were [. . .] how to avoid children’s services, police, how to escape drunks, dope heads. But knowing where sleep was safe was the most important thing. It took time and she had to learn what kinds of people would give you money and what for, and remember the back doors of which food pantries or restaurants had kind and generous servers. The biggest problem was finding food and storing it for later. She deliberately made no friend of any kind—young or old, stable or wandering nuts. Anybody could turn you in or hurt you. (103)

Homeless children are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, victimization, substance abuse and other kinds of adverse outcomes: they are more likely to have health, mental

or behavioral problems; they may have less or not at all access to medical care; they may witness violent events. Steve and Evelyn find Rain in the streets, and rescue her.

Children, who are victims of sexual abuse, may have intimacy or sexual issues, or/and dysfunctional adult relationships, as they grow older. They are more likely to show fear or anxiety in response to people who share characteristics of the abuser. Rain is scared of men. They make her feel sick. She recalls when she first met the hippy couple. At Steve's simple touch, Rain "thought of the men who came to her mother's house, so she had to run off, miss the food lady [Evelyn] and hide" (103). Survivors of childhood sexual abuse may feel anger, betrayal and an inability to trust adults because someone they depended on harmed them or failed to protect them. Rain is so dreadfully hurt that when Steve and Evelyn take her in, she wants to kill everybody.

The aging couple does not want to hear about Rain's experiences at her mother's house or about her street life, so she has to tell everything to her kitten, and later to Bride. The feral girl finds in the black woman the only person she can confide in. Bride is horrified to hear the trials and tribulations Rain has gone through in her short life. She wonders "[h]ow could anybody do that to a child, any child, and one's own?" (102). Compared to the girl's prostitute mother, Bride's own mother does not seem so bad: "Even Sweetness, who for years couldn't bear to look at or touch her, never threw her out" (101). Bride cannot believe how dauntlessly this "tough little girl, who wasted no time on self-pity" (103), has lead her life.

Bride's encounter with Rain, a transformative and restorative episode, affects the woman deeply. Sharing a traumatic childhood makes them connect emotionally. Rain "conjures her [Bride's] repressed feelings of racial rejection at the hands of Sweetness" (Sturgeon, 2015). In the conversation that Bride and Rain have in the woods, there is a sort of mother-daughter communion, which is mirrored in the fawn that nestles her doe's flank. In their brief relationship, Rain feels strong affection for the blue-black woman, who risks her life to safeguard the girl from being hurt by some men. In her low self-esteem, Rain is surprised at Bride's disinterested and generous act, since "nobody [had] put their own self in danger to save me. Save my life" (105-6). Bride and Rain's true companionship and Bride's endangerment of her own life to protect the girl are a healing experience for the woman, a true act of restitution.

5. Conclusion: "A Path From Self-Hatred to Self-Acceptance"

At the end of the novel, Bride faces Booker and confesses why she paid a visit to a "child molester" in prison; how she lied and helped convict Sofia to get some love from her mother. Booker, on the other hand, explains to her about his brother being killed by a sexual predator. Watching the lovers' fight, Queen wonders if redemption is possible for them. She thinks "they will blow it" (158), as she did it:

Each will cling to a sad little story of hurt and sorrow—some long-ago trouble and pain life dumped on their pure and innocent selves. And each one will rewrite that story forever, knowing the plot, guessing the theme, inventing its meaning and dismissing its origin.

What waste. She knew from personal experience how hard loving was, how selfish and how easily sundered. Withholding sex or relying on it, ignoring children or devouring them, rerouting true feelings or locking them out. Youth being the excuse for that fortune-cookie love—until it wasn't, until it became pure adult stupidity. (158)

Nevertheless, Queen seems to be quite wrong. Finally, Booker, apparently, lays to rest the ghosts of the past. He apologizes to his brother, who “is probably weary of being my burden and cross” (161), for using him. He writes in his notebook:

I don't miss you anymore adam rather i miss the emotion that your dying produced a feeling so strong it defined me while it erased you leaving only your absence for me to live in like the silence of the japanese gong that is more thrilling than whatever sound may follow. I apologize for enslaving you in order to chain myself to the illusion of control and the cheap seduction of power. No slave owner could have done it better. (161)

On the other hand, Bride, after acknowledging her childhood sins, has a deep restorative sleep. She “felt newly born”: “No longer forced to relive, no, outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father” (162). Sharing childhood traumatic life events with empathic listeners is really helpful, a healing coping strategy. True repentance and taking control of her life bring about the magical return of Bride's feminine attributes, which heralds her renewed self. The first successful step of Bride and Booker's resumed relationship as a couple consists of working together to help someone without thinking of themselves. They show unselfish love when they take care of Queen at the hospital. Eventually, Bride tells Booker that she is pregnant and he offers her “the hand she had craved all her life, the hand that did not need a lie to deserve it, the hand of trust and caring for—a combination that some call natural love” (175). At the end of the novel, they vow that things will be different for them: “A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath” (175).

The sunny ending of *God Help the Child* displays substantial optimism. There is no doubt that the psychological and emotional childhood scars that populate this narrative are somehow finally mended. Most of the main characters, true survivors of child abuse, experience a cathartic transformation in their lives. Rain finds in the hippy couple the possibility of growing up and healing from her childhood wounds. Queen also seems to attain some kind of redemption in her role as Booker's Daedalic guide. Likewise, Bride and Booker appear to come to terms with their traumatic histories. They both finally realize that childhood trauma has hurled them away from the “rip and wave of life” (174). Now, they are expecting a baby, and they envision a hopeful future for them. Nonetheless, Sweetness's last words, “[y]ou are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works and how it changes when you are a parent” (178), deliver “the kind of warning that is sounded across Ms. Morrison's novels—that trying to protect children from the world's unsleeping hatreds is a generational job” (Sacks, 2015). As Leo Robson (2015) argues: “Morrison tries to ward off a fairytale ending by threatening Bride's rainbow with yet more storm clouds, but it's a half-hearted gesture,

at odds with the novel's prevailing message that trauma can be overcome, scars can mutate into beauty spots, life can be remade."

To sum up, in *God Help the Child* Morrison delves again into one of her most powerful themes, cruelties visited upon children and their repercussions in adulthood. Her main characters all, in one way or another, carry the burden of childhood trauma: "[A] set of connections, which extend from her [Bride] to Booker and on to a semi-feral girl named Rain [. . .]: a cycle of abuse, of molestation" (Ulin, 2015). Morrison "masterfully explores the nature of victimhood and the consequences of child abuse through a series of fascinating and believable narrators" (Anrig, 2015). She unveils how

our culture is so attuned to the horror stories of childhood abuse, and so often when they appear there is the attendant desire for retribution. There is a quiet reflection of the legacy of abuse in this novel—how the damage is hidden, but lingers in every encounter an abused person has as an adult. And there is much to be admired here: perspective, luminous language, and courage in confronting the difficulty of the big subject. (Iqbal, 2015)

Morrison does not shrink from exposing the harsh realities children face, and how the traumatic past is constantly shaping their lives. She returns to questions of race and manages to lay bare how much slavery and its legacy still today impact blacks' lives, uncovering the emotional and psychological chokehold their histories have on them.

In her latest novel, Morrison repeats the number six time and again: Lula Ann is six years old when she witnesses a little boy's rape; Sofia is six feet tall; Lula Ann drops out of school and flees her home at the age of sixteen; Bride's company sells six cosmetic lines; Bride and Booker spend six months together before he leaves; Booker pronounces six words before he departs; the total amount on the reminder invoice for Booker's repaired horn is sixty-eight dollars; Adam is one of six victims of a sexual predator; Booker's family has to wait six months before their son's body is found and six years until his murderer is caught; Rain is six when the hippy couple finds her; Bride spends six difficult weeks with Steve and Evelyn; Dr. Muskie tells Bride that she would need six weeks to recover from her accident. According to Barbara M. Fisher, numbers in a text might be called "principles of linguistic impotence," statements that cannot be expressed through language; inexpressibility that applies to suffering and pain, to those things that are unspeakable because they cannot be articulated by the words we use for ordinary experiences (1997: 124-5). The concentration of sixes in *God Help the Child* seems to have the same purpose it had in *Beloved*, which was dedicated to "Sixty Million and more," linking two experiences of profound affliction, the Middle Passage and the millions of people exterminated by the Nazis. By means of the number six, Morrison's latest novel depicts the unspeakable suffering of all those children who have undergone molestation or victimization of any kind or any traumatic event. *God Help the Child* is a homage to all the uncountable victims of child abuse, an ongoing horrifying drama that does not have an end.

And yet, Morrison's "fundamental message is as clear and deliberate in *God Help the Child* as it has ever been. Ms. Morrison's 'project'—the word is her own—is to empower her readers by exposing the psychic toll of cultural oppression and to chart a

path from self-hatred to self-acceptance” (Sacks, 2015). She urges her characters to deal with their trauma and “move along. It’s not all about you and your little trauma” (Off, 2015). Morrison focuses on the need to put down the traumatic past, and the need of self-forgiveness and self-acceptance. She seems to hope that, despite the deep-rooted damage inflicted by child abuse, black individuals can overcome it and live the present fully and intensely.

Notes

1. “Orangish” is the closest color to the dazzling yellow of the day Adam was skating, Booker’s last memory of him.

2. Jonathon Sturgeon argues that the disappearance of Bride’s pubic hair and the fact that she stops having her period are “two events that are less surrealist modifiers than indications of psychosomatic violence caused to the body by racial rejection” (2015).

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