



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 08, Issue 07, 2019: 42-52

Article Received: 18-03-2019

Accepted: 12-04-2019

Available Online: 26-07-2019

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v8i7.1615>

“You not the woman”: Beauty, Transformation, and the Quest for Love in Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye and God Help the Child

Alaa Alghamdi¹

ABSTRACT

This comparative study of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *God Help the Child* (2015) focuses on the transformational identities of the two female protagonists, and speculates about the connection between them. Themes of transformation, deformation, alienation and a specifically female version of the hero's journey guide the analysis, which concludes that Pecola and Bride are, in fact, like two women joined familiarly through generations, carrying the same core trauma, despite Bride's apparent social acceptance and success. The social ramifications of the familiarity of these two women, separated by almost half a century, include the need for continued progress in the personal and social empowerment of young Black women.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child*, *The Bluest Eye*, Transformation, Deformation, female beauty, acceptance, abuse.

This is an open access article under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's latest novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), addresses themes first broached in her earliest work, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) – race, internalized racism, abuse, and the perception of female beauty. The two novels can easily be viewed as bookends to Morrison's career, and the evolution of the young female protagonist in the intervening period of close to half a century has been remarkable - or perhaps not. This, indeed, is the implicit question that Morrison seems to be posing.

Toni Morrison's novels are lauded for their exploration of social issues in addition to their undeniable literary merit. In particular, themes of child abuse have been noted especially with regard to *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*. Diana Ansarey (2017) points out that Morrison's treatment of child abuse in *The Bluest Eye* was "groundbreaking", because it discussed the topic not as an isolated crime but "thematically linked" to larger issues such as beauty, race and alienation (51). It was Morrison's stated intention in writing *The Bluest Eye* to discuss race from the perspective of a young

¹ Associate Professor, English Literature, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia. Email: alaaghamdi@yahoo.com

girl, a voice rarely heard; the novel was, in fact, her "response to Ralph Ellison", who so eloquently expressed the African American man's experience. The recognition of fundamental differences highlights the importance of gender in dealing with issues of race. That is not to suggest, however, that for some, Morrison's protagonists have not epitomized the experience of internalized racism and oppression (Krupa, 2015, 143). In a sense, as critics recognize, the young child protagonist and, in a particular, the young female protagonist offer an extreme view, a picture of how things are for those most likely to be powerless. Lopez Ramirez (2016) in her reading of *God Help the Child* points out that children "bear the brunt" of social ills in the form of personal, familial and internalized abuse. Morrison's expression of the dual consciousness of the African American subject - always conscious of being watched and criticized - as well as her apt portrayal of socio-economic racially-based inequalities in 1950s America, are acknowledged (Rajesh and Parveen, 2015; Reyes, 2015). *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* are sometimes discussed in unison, for example by Lopez Ramirez (2016). However, an odd dichotomy occurs within critical discussions of *God Help the Child*. Critics appear to focus either on the theme of abuse or, less frequently, of Black empowerment and success - Akhtar's (2018) article is an example of the following. The two themes, however, are rarely linked or considered in unison, though that contradiction is intrinsic to Morrison's novel. It is as though there is a difficulty in conceiving of the empowered, successful and beautiful subject as someone whose persona also encompasses the small, abused girl - but to ignore this difficulty is to miss Morrison's point.

Pecola Breedlove and Lula Ann Bridewell (Bride) are, respectively, Toni Morrison's earliest and most recent published fictional heroines. Mohsin and Takseen (2016) call Bride the 'postmodern avatar' of Pecola, based on both their similarities and disparities. Delphine Gras notes further similarities between the two, noting "the protagonists of both novels yearn for love and undergo literal or imagined physical transformations of their own in their attempts to find acceptance and family...". Doubtless, however, certain positive changes are obvious. Whereas Pecola remains an unloved child, convinced of her ugliness, and driven to insanity by her wish for 'the bluest eye' and the acceptance she believes would come with conventional (white) beauty, Bride evolves well beyond that circumscribed reality and becomes a materially successful and admired woman who celebrates and highlights her dark skin by dressing only in white. Yet during the brief and eventful course of Bride's story, we see her dragged unwillingly into an adventure that causes her to regress with remarkable speed into someone with a child's body, alone, rejected and reviled. In effect, the vulnerability of Bride's independence and acceptance is demonstrated through her transformations, cautioning of the precarious nature of the strides that have been made in racial and gender equality, particularly in the presence of trauma – a constant theme in Morrison's body of work. It is uncertain, therefore, whether Bride really is a 'postmodern avatar', a more advanced version of Pecola Breedlove, or whether, at the same time, she and Pecola are one and the same. The dirt-poor Pecola Breedlove of the 1940s may seem worlds away from the Jaguar-driving executive Bride, but Morrison's use of literary magic shows us that she is not.

There has been considerable literary and critical scholarship dealing with Morrison's first novel, and comparatively little regarding the latest. Of course, this may be due to the time elapsed since the two publications, but I believe there is another factor at play as well - Bride's problematic persona. As noted, critics seem to deal with either one or the other aspect of this character - her victimhood, or her empowerment - but seldom both at once. Similarities to Pecola Breedlove have been pointed out, of course, and these observations are the foundation of my own critical examination, as well as the inspiration for it. Bride is a complex character who carries within her disparate components. The internalized racism and oppression of the past are still very much a part of her, as is manifest in the action of the novel. The crucial question is, however, whether she will be able to overcome and incorporate - not efface - the limitations of her personal and socio-political past.

Through an examination of both novels, and particularly their lead characters, I intend to undertake a comprehensive study of this new Black female protagonist as portrayed by Morrison, her links to the past, and the hope she represents for the future.

2. Methodology

This analysis starts with a close examination of the lead characters of both novels, including insights into their personas that stem from the names Morrison has chosen for each. Both Pecola

and Bride have names that are rich in connotations and that reflect their actual or aspirational selves. Accepting the premise that there is a connection between these two characters, I intend to examine precisely what that connection is through a comparison of their actions and identities.

Further, given that the characters share the element of transformation or deformation - real, imagined or aspirational - the framework of magic realism will be applied to them, particularly with regard to themes of shape-shifting and transformation. Finally, each girl's narrative will be examined with regard to its similarity to or deviation from the Hero's (or in this case, Heroine's) journey.

Through this examination, we will gain insight into the central question regarding these two fascinating characters and Morrison's intention in creating them: Who are they, really? Are the differences between Pecola and Bride to be regarded in terms of contrast or convergence, development or regression? And what does this say about the evolving social position of the young Black woman over the course of almost 50 years of American social history?

3. Who are they?

Pecola Breedlove and Lula Ann Bridewell. Of course, Morrison has chosen the names of her heroines carefully, and each is rich with embedded meaning. First, the similarity in the surnames – particularly in their first syllables – alerts us of the connection between these two girls. Breed/Bride – the words are phonetically similar and thematically connected, as, in theory, one becomes a bride and then proceeds to 'breed', that is, have children. 'Breed' on its own, however, has a connotation that may be derogatory. The term 'breeding' or the reference to 'breeds' does not distinguish between humans and animals. "Halfbreed" or simply "those breeds" were derogatory terms referring to mixed-race or Metis people (for example, in Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners*). The second part of Pecola's surname is simply poignant: the whole point is that she is not loved.

The first name "Pecola", interestingly, means "a brazen woman"². Perhaps, then, her name is wholly ironic, as, in the first place, we never see her become a woman, and she is far from "brave and audacious", though she may wish to be. She is pregnant but her baby does not survive, hence she does not breed; she is not loved. "Somebody has to love you" she is told is the prerequisite for having a baby (Morrison TBE 32). So it is obvious then why she cannot. She is unable to fulfill her name as she is of her aspiration of having the bluest eye. She is not brazen, not a woman, not breeding, not loved; in other words, she exists as a negative image, an unfulfilled potentiality.

Bride, before the story begins, was Lula Ann Bridewell. She has renamed herself, keeping the single syllable "Bride", following a brief stint as "Ann Bride". But whereas Pecola seems to be less than her name, Bride is more, as she finds out she has more connection with the rejected "Lula Ann" than she had thought or wished to retain. "Lula Ann" sounds countrified and juvenile, almost a parody of what one would expect an uneducated country girl to be called³. The rejected name, however, hides certain strengths. Lula means "famous warrior, other, foreign" as well as "abundance, lady, princess" - qualities that the wealthy and successful Bride, with her 'exotic' blackness, comes to embody. Ann means "favour" and "grace"; "Miss Ann", according to Wikipedia, also refers to a Black woman "acting white"!

The meaning of "Bride" may appear obvious, but in fact is not. As well as being the term for a woman about to marry, Bride in Irish is the derivation of Bridget, meaning "strength". So Bride is inevitably warrior, yet she pares down her name, making it smaller, picking and choosing. Accepting this part of it but not the other, and the fact that Booker does not call her by any name at all (rather, just 'baby' or my girl) appears to take away her strength.

The difference between Pecola and Bride is, perhaps, that Pecola aspires to be, but cannot be, everything that her name entails. Conversely, everything in Bride's name affirms her strength and identity, but she persists in shortening and omitting, relying only on the most obvious interpretation of

² Unless otherwise specified, all name meanings in this section are from www.babynamespedia.com

³ One wonders whether then name and, in part, the character is an homage to Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. The main character, Holly Golightly, is also a young woman who has come to the city and renamed and redefined herself, and her name was originally "Lula Mae". Holly is characterized primarily by her lack of roots and commitment, cut off as she is from the identity she outgrew. Though different in personality, Bride shares some of these characteristics.

the syllable that remains, and seemingly this is then her aspiration – to find someone who loves her, just as Pecola wanted as well: to become a bride and to breed.

Pecola and Bride are both largely occupied by this quest, to such an extent that it seems to define them. Because Bride appears further along in attaining it, her narrative consists largely of a fall and eventual restitution. Just before the beginning of the narrative and of Bride's string of misfortunes, her boyfriend Booker has told her (or valid reasons relating to his own past, as it turns out) "You not the woman" (Morrison, *GHTC*, chapter 2).

Booker's statement is effectively a malediction or a curse. It comes true. Immediately afterward, Bride begins to lose her ability to be a woman, through a series of incidents and a bit of magic realism. Bride's agency and her power are gone. In short, she regresses in short order to a young girl who is perhaps a younger version of herself, or perhaps a girl like Pecola. On a social level, her regression into a young girl strips her of all power, thus revealing the fact that her power was based almost entirely on her appearance.

On a personal level, the effects of her regression are even more profound. Being rejected by Booker catapults Bride back to the child that she once was - powerless and unloved. Perhaps this occurs in the manner of a flashback to a painful or traumatic situation; when PTSD is present, the subject may in fact become "unstuck in time" as Kurt Vonnegut famously and eloquently calls it in *Slaughterhouse Five*. For the PTSD sufferer, time is indeed not linear, for a triggering event can bring their mind and senses immediately back to the time of the trauma - and this occurs repeatedly. Bride's physical regression may be a representation of this phenomenon: rejected by Booker as she was by her mother, she becomes who she was at the time of that original wound.

Another interpretation is that it is Booker's attention - the attention of a male within a heterosexual relationship - that has 'made' Bride into a woman. When Booker negates that, stating that she is not the woman for him, that identity is taken away. The message therefore is that a woman is only a woman in the context of a relationship with a man. Bride's chosen name, of course, supports this idea. While there is power and beauty in the single syllable, the adoption of which was part of the making of Bride's career and a stripping away of elements that were not wanted - the countrified and juvenile "Lula Ann", whom Bride now feels returning - the meaning is inescapable. A bride is someone who would not exist as such without her male counterpart. This suggests that Bride's existence as the beautiful, powerful and adult woman that she is contingent upon her attachment to a man - not, interestingly, for money or status, but simply for her very being. The fact that she dresses only in white (though it may have racial connotations as well) suggests this interpretation of the word bride. Then, the fact that Booker refuses to call her by that name - will not validate her or marry her - confirms the power that he has in the situation. Bride herself can be obliterated by the loss of the male gaze, because she exists only within it.

In order to bring the narratives of Bride and Pecola to some sort of resolution, given that they are about identity, there must be transformation of various sorts. Transformation and its varying connotations is a thread that can take us through the narratives, unpacking, as it were, their meaning.

4. Types of transformation

Both novels contain – indeed, hinge upon – incidents physical transformation in ways that both follow and defy physical law. In *The Bluest Eye*, magical transformation does not actually occur, but is the content of Pecola's wishful imagination, her belief that she has been miraculously gifted with blue eyes. This in itself is a sign of both Pecola's mental decline into delusion and her racialization and exposure to racial and cultural biases and discrimination. It is not, however, the first or only instance of transformation Pecola undergoes. In the beginning of the narrative, she begins menstruating, and is told that this event has made her into a woman. Later, in observing his daughter washing dishes at the sink, Cholly Breedlove transforms her in his mind to the image of her mother as a young girl. This 'transformation' is of course delusional and the direct precursor to her rape. Nonetheless, it is described in terms of a shifting of form.

In the case of the latter novel, the theme of magical or realistic transformation is more prevalent. Most obviously, after Bride is rejected by her boyfriend, her body reverts to a pre-adolescent form. Moreover, Bride's physical appearance is transformed in a non-magical way near the beginning of

the narrative, when she is beaten. Preceding that, another transformation had also already taken place: her very dark skin, formerly a sign of stigma and shame, has become a selling point, the key to her beauty and her material success. Concurrently, her name is transformed, from the countrified Lula Ann Bridewell to Ann Bride and then simply Bride, with all its accompanying connotations of a nubile and desired woman. Finally, one might argue that both Bride and Pecola undergo an ordinary, but nonetheless pivotal, transformation: pregnancy. A girl's or woman's pregnancy may be considered a simple plot point in many narratives, but in Morrison's novels the existing references to a magical or supernatural physical transformation invite us to view the pregnancies in the same light: a shape-shifting that signals the transformation, real or merely aspired to, from one state to another.

Shape-shifting can connote power, the power of a trickster or shaman. In both of Morrison's heroines, however, it would appear that power remains untapped. Their desire for transformation or their unwilling transformation appears to presage a profound loss of power, status, stability or sanity. Pecola's desire for blue eyes and her delusion that she has received them illustrates her vulnerability, her desire for acceptance and her belief regarding what that acceptance would mean or entail. Blue eyes, of course, would make her beautiful in her own view and that of the world; she would be closer in appearance to Shirley Temple and the blue-eyed babies that she (and society) views as being worthy of love, attention, praise and worth. And Bride's unwilling transformations cause her distress and make her lose social power. Without her feminine beauty, she will have neither a source of livelihood nor any close relationship.

Thus, both Pecola and Bride undergo elements of both an involuntary transformation to a less viable or desirable form, and the opposite (or in Pecola's case the attempt at such). Whereas blackness is a liability for Pecola, and one that she wishes to change in order to attain beauty, Bride's black skin, despised by the older generation (including, crucially, her mother) has become a currency - a selling point. Bride's very black skin is a large part of what makes her beautiful, and the image she projects - black skin set off by only white clothing - is a basis for her professional success.

The vindication that is implied by this evolution in cultural attitudes regarding Black women's beauty is however compromised by the inherent vulnerability of any system which makes beauty the basis for status. Thus, Bride's transformation was from an 'ugly' and unloved little girl much like Pecola to a beautiful, desired and successful woman, but her involuntary transformation/deformity involves the loss of her beauty. While this first occasion of deformity is certainly within the bounds of realism, the second is not. Subsequent to her abandonment by Booker, Bride loses her womanly attributes - her pubic hair, her breasts, her wide hips, even the piercings in her ears. Whether this is hallucinatory (as no one else appears to notice) or magic realism, it is certainly symbolic. Booker tells her, "You not the woman for me", and in response, Bride seemingly ceases to be a woman at all. Perhaps more importantly, though, she is now the girl who has been hurt. In regressing to Lula Ann, she has returned to the site of her trauma, because trauma knows no time. Thus, it is the little girl who forcibly and through magic reasserts herself - against logic, against nature, and very much against Bride's own wishes. The little girl is as unwanted as Bride herself was as a child: deemed unacceptable, certainly inconvenient, ruinous to the heterosexual bond (as her parents divorce, according to Sweetness, because of the darkness of Bride's skin), and relentlessly seeking acceptance, attention and care. This, perhaps, is finally fulfilled through a series of episodes in which Bride needs, seeks, and finally offers help. The progression takes the form of a specifically female-centred version of a Hero's Journey.⁴

5. The Heroine's journey

In a hero's journey, the hero answers a call to adventure and leaves his society to venture into the underworld, a place where he is lost, must prove himself, and receives guidance and help.

⁴ The Hero's Journey, also known as the Monomyth, is a concept articulated by Joseph Campbell. It is well known and explanations and diagrams of this type of narrative are easily accessible, so I will omit explaining what the heroic cycle is, except to quote Joseph Campbell himself: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 23). My point here is that Bride's story follows this trajectory, but her concerns and her quest are fundamentally female, and involve both a search for mothering and to become a mother herself.

Eventually he returns to his society, bringing with him something of value that will enrich the society. Bride's story follows a similar trajectory, but the entire plot revolves around a number of episodes in which Bride is ejected from her accustomed circumstances and role, and seeks 'mothering', of a sort. First her friend Brooklyn, whom Bride trusts, ostensibly helps but ultimately takes advantage of her. Next, after breaking her ankle, Bride temporarily becomes the temporary foster daughter of Evelyn and Steve, and sister to Rain. Here we see nurturing that is physically adequate but spiritually lacking. Evelyn and Steve go well beyond what might be expected of strangers, hosting Bride for weeks, washing and feeding her. Yet it is through her identification with Rain, formerly an abused child, that healing seems to come, perhaps because Bride is in the role of, if not a woman or mother as yet (given her regressed body that fits the little girl's clothing), at least a big sister. She provides for Rain something that the foster parents have not - she asks Rain about her experiences and allows her to talk about them, and shelters Rain from an accidental shooting. Rain says, "My heart was beating fast because no one had done that before. I mean Steve and Evelyn took me in but nobody put their own self in danger to save me. To save my life." (Morrison GHTC chapter 11) Seemingly there is healing in the telling of the story, for both parties.

The call to adventure is Booker's rejection and the beating that Bride receives, both of which, as we have seen, serve to expel her from her accustomed place in society. Her quest is one to both be mothered and to become a mother herself, and as she nears the end of the journey, the third and final surrogate mother is Queen. Queen performs a valuable, indeed pivotal role. She accepts Bride, offering a safe destination for her journey. She is the receptacle of knowledge - in this case, the contents of Booker's mind as well as his present whereabouts. She keeps that information safe, functioning as a home base. Finally, and crucially, she provides an opportunity for Bride to help her, and it is when she does so that Bride regains her former womanly attributes, her relationship with Booker, and recognizes that she is pregnant, possibly the successful conclusion to her journey (although it is, of course, the beginning of a new one).

Though the outcome is uncertain, Bride fulfills and fully travels the same journey that Pecola attempted, generations earlier. Pecola is younger, less educated, more severely abused, and more socially marginalized; yet, these are merely differences of degree, when we compare her with Bride. Nevertheless, the differences are crucial to the outcome. Pecola, like Bride, seeks mothering (for example, Mrs. MacTeer is a temporary surrogate mother to her, and the daughters, Frieda and Claudia, also, offer guidance and care) and then seeks to become a mother herself. All of these quests and desires fail. The MacTeers are well-intentioned and are a representation of a functional family, but their attention and resources do not extend to giving Pecola what she needs. Mrs. MacTeer has strained resources and time, begrudging Pecola the milk that she drinks; the girls are still very young and succumb to magical thinking, believing their planting of marigolds will help Pecola, though they are really, of course, powerless to help her. Pecola becomes pregnant at 11 through incest and, of course, her pregnancy is not viable; she is, in any case, clearly too young to perform the role of a mother. The attempt to attain blue eyes, like the beloved babies that she has observed, is her final attempt to secure what she wants and needs. Of course, this fails as well.

6. Magical transformations and hidden strengths

Magical transformations, in Morrison, appear at one level to be manifestations of inner wounds or deficiencies. Thus, Bride, feeling as though she has lost the status of an independent woman that she had previously achieved, physically regresses to a girl. In and of itself, however, the regression of her body to an earlier state is magical, transformative, and, perhaps, monstrous because of its deviation from accepted norms. This is conveyed in the novel using some of the tropes of magic realism, where a magical element is added to a seemingly realistic text, without discussion or self-consciousness on the part of the narrator (Chanady 16). The magical element is accepted by the characters as something real, merely something that has occurred.

Yet magical realism adds something more to one's experience of the narrative and the message that it conveys. Magic realism often exists in the narratives of the oppressed. The circumstances of the world are so limiting, so oppressive to the subject that relief and liberation can come only through a retreat into the magical. This is the *deus ex machina* type of transformation, employed by the writer of

fairy tales and realistic fiction alike. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a girl is taken up to the sky body and soul in the manner of certain Christian icons; in Roald Dahl's short story "The Swan", a bullied boy flies away on the wings of a swan. The sudden intervention and insertion of the magical is the only way in which justice can be achieved, but it is also the only available means of escape. (It is fascinating to reflect whether the antecedent to these miraculous interventions may indeed be, in Christian cultures, miracles themselves - for example, salvation of the martyrs and the empty tomb three days after the crucifixion of Christ himself.) Simply stated, when one is marginalized and limited beyond the point of human endurance or salvation, magic realism, along with spectrality, provides recourse, restitution, or continued visibility. Importantly, it is the only means of doing so.

It is precisely this sort of magical escape through transformation that Pecola yearns for when she bargains for a charm that will give her blue eyes. With blue eyes, she will be able to rise above her reality and into something higher, and better; something connoting escape. Indeed, from her limited circumstances, it appears that this is the only escape. She does not aspire to full transcendence but to what, to her, must seem to be a truly transcendent, elevated state, the dominant ideal of beauty.

Yet transformation through magical realism is more than simply an escape from intolerable circumstances, which could, after all, be expressed more simply as plot devices. Magical realism and the supernatural transformation calls attention to itself because it is so unusual, because it "couldn't really happen". Typically, it is the most memorable or defining aspect of any narrative that it is a part of, the reason being simply that magical elements inserted into an otherwise realistic narrative command a great deal of attention. They are both true and obviously untrue; true in the sense that they represent a real hope or fear, untrue in the sense that they deny the constraints that we all live with, or, perhaps, accentuate them. Thus the situation of the marginalized subject is suddenly writ large.

Magical transformation is associated with the character of the Trickster. The Trickster, in mythology, holds a certain sort of power that one might not suspect; because we are unable to categorize such a character, he or she becomes less vulnerable to the forces that normally constrain and limit freedom. Moreover, the Trickster's inner qualities, needs and desires - those which may not otherwise achieve expression - find a voice through the magic of transformation. In magic realism, where the magic and the real exist side by side, those hidden strengths and desires are allowed to exist alongside a more straightforward representation of reality. We are forced therefore to consider them, see them, and give them credence.

Within a text, the presence of a Trickster or of magically transformative elements adds depth, in the form of an extra perspective or a supra-ordinary view, to the narrative. Thus, the Trickster's mythopoeic ambivalence (ambi = both +valent = of worth) teaches us to hold contraries in creative tension – coincidenta oppositorum – without dropping, devaluing or denying one over the other" (Deardoff)

In other words, what is 'real' and what cannot possibly be are forced to co-exist and receive equal consideration within the context of the story. This destabilizes the reality that exists within the story, as the "... illogical and transgressive manner in which myth works to reverse, revise and deform our typical ideas and beliefs resembles the Mythic Trickster, the many named, shape-shifting, gender-bending, ambi-valent adventurer ... embodying and articulating the powerful inferiority employed to leap the split between one's exterior and interior life" (Deardoff).

It is in one's exterior life that one is appraised, judged, and categorized, to the benefit of some and the detriment of others within the social sphere. However, the power of the magical element and of the Trickster is to transcend and resist such categorization, so that norms are breached and the thoughts, feelings and inner realities of the powerless are, if not predominant, at least presented for observation. Thus the invisible wall holding the powerless to their places is breached.

Pecola's wish for blue eyes can, of course, be viewed as superficial and pitiable. However, one must not neglect the fact that it is, at its root, a wish and a quest for transformation; moreover, it would be transformation that is voluntary and pro-active, occurring at the wish and to the specifications of the girl herself. It is a wish to occupy a different position in society, but no less, to occupy a different type of reality – one in which one's inner wishes, quests and deficiencies are forced onto the public's attention.

Of course, Bride, prior to the start of the narrative, has already achieved a remarkable and voluntary, though not magical, transformation herself. It is one that has bolstered her position in

society, from an 'ugly' country girl to a beautiful, sophisticated and successful woman. Yet Bride's transformation, though ostensibly far more successful, lacks the very elements that give Pecola's aspirational transformation its “Trickster” power.

First, though Bride's transformation is of her own choosing, it is not from her own imagination. In fact, she does not even appear to have autonomy over her own appearance. She is told to dress all in white and never to wear any makeup by Jeri, a “total person designer” (Morrison GHTC chapter 4). Jeri's advice, and his wording in delivering it, gave Bride both her new image and the inspiration for her cosmetic line, “You Girl”; as Bride says, “It made me, remade me” (Morrison GHTC chapter 4).

Second, Bride's carefully curated outward appearance affords her material power, but does not transgress or subvert an established social order. Rather, Bride, clothed in white, joins the existing ranks of power, her dark skin a curiosity and an ornament. Finally, Bride's voluntary transformation does not speak to or address her inner hunger or deficiency, though it is of course possible that she had supposed it would. Indeed, even to the reader, it initially seems so, as the unloved girl has become an admired and successful woman. But the magical element that emerges in Bride's story points to a different lack and a different objective – one that may be identical to Pecola's. After all, as pointed out previously, Pecola's wish for blue eyes comes not from an observation of women but of children and babies. A blue eyed child, like Shirley Temple, will be adored and nurtured, and the experience of that child is what Pecola and Bride both lack. The magical element in Bride's story appears to confirm this, by pointing to the same deficiency, but using a slightly different tool – deformation, rather than transformation.

7. Deformity

So far, the real, magical and attempted changes that Bride and Pecola undergo have been framed and considered as transformations. However, they may equally be considered deformations – changes that take the subject out of the realm of what may be considered normal or natural. Whereas 'transformation' connotes an active, often positive change to another, perhaps elevated state, deformation is an affliction. It suggests both the existence of an accepted norm and one's unfortunate deviation from it. The notion of a physical deformation, transformation or change, one that the ordinary laws of nature would forbid, is one that has been noted and explored in both culture and literature.

As with transformation, there is a distinction to be drawn between natural or realistic 'deformity' and that which is brought about magically. A person may be deformed by natural or supernatural means. For example, Bride's injury alters her physical appearance to the point that she temporarily loses the beauty which has been a core aspect of her identity and her professional success. After having been beaten, it is suggested that she may not be able to do her job. In Brooklyn's words:

A quarter of her face is fine; the rest is cratered. Ugly black stitches, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead, lips so Ubangi she can't pronounce the r in raw, which is what her skin looks like... Worse than anything is her nose – nostrils wide as an orangutan's under gauze the size of a bagel... I shouldn't be thinking this. But her position at Sylvia, Inc might be up for grabs. How can she persuade women to improve their looks with products that can't improve her own? (Morrison GHTC chapter 3).

Thus her identity and social position has shifted because of her 'deformity'. Indeed, deformity or deviation from the norm is often an antecedent to social marginalization or exclusion. In this way, for example, in *The Bluest Eye*, “Cholly's wife, Pauline, feels isolated throughout her life... [because] as a child, she suffered an injury to her foot that left her with a limp, and it is this self-perceived 'deformity' that she identifies as the root of her 'separateness’” (Anderson 22). Of course, in Morrison's work, extreme blackness may also be such a marker of separateness - it is what excludes Bride, as a child, from the love of her mother, and it is part of what excludes Pecola's family from society.

Whereas the Trickster figure retains a certain power and is associated with transformation, another figure that of the monster, is associated with deformation. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen offers insightful observations on the meaning of the 'monster' or monstrous figure in society. Cohen observes, first of all, that “the monster's body is cultural... it embodies fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy”... etymologically it is “that which reveals” and “that which warns” (Cohen 5). Deformity, or what is considered to be the loss of natural or desirable form, is likewise “cultural” because it expresses

the fear – and also, possibly, “desire, anxiety, and fantasy” - of the failure to adhere to norms. For *Bride*, for example, the disfiguration of her face and the loss of her womanhood are profoundly fearsome, but may also contain a fantasy or a desire for a reality in which her worth would not be thus judged.

8. Ghosts

Toni Morrison is perhaps best known for her depiction of the devastation that comes about as a legacy of slavery, as represented by *Beloved*; a ghost of a child murdered by her own mother for her own protection. The power of the social institution of slavery to so strongly subvert even the most powerful social bond, that between mother and child, and the subsequent persistence of *Beloved* after her death, in the form of a ghost, are the defining features of this narrative and of Morrison's indictment of slavery itself. Anderson argues that even in her earlier novels, Morrison portrays 'ghosts' that exist on the outer edges of society. She calls this element of Morrison's fiction 'spectrality' and argues that one does not have to be dead or an element of the supernatural in order to be a ghost. Rather, ghosts are those who exist outside of the protection of society, yet, crucially, do not go away. They persist in order to remind others of the wrongs that have been perpetrated upon them.

Using the metaphor of the ghost for female and ethnic invisibility from the critical work of Kathleen Brogan and Avery F. Gordon, I read the *Breedloves*, and in particular *Pecola*, as social ghosts who haunt the periphery of their community as they struggle with poverty and racism” (Anderson)

To Brogan (cited by Anderson): the ghost is a “transitional figure, a go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another”... but also as a metaphor for silenced characters, particularly women... “ghosted individuals” signal an “absence made present” ... a kind of living ghost (Brogan 25).

Thus, “*Pecola* and her family haunt the narrative” - and this perhaps applies most strongly to *Pecola*, who, though she continues to exist, is rendered non-functional, unable to understand or contribute or to receive love (Brogan 26). It may be seen, however, that there are 'ghosts' in *God Help the Child* as well, though they are more subtle. Booker's brother, murdered as a child, persists to haunt Booker's daily life, albeit in memory rather than supernatural form. Booker “vanish[es] like a ghost” (Morrison *GHTC* chapter 4). *Bride* herself becomes one, when she leaves (or is expelled from) her contrived safe existence and embarks on her version of a hero's journey. It is even possible to speculate that the quintessential hero, in leaving society and descending into the underworld, assumes the role of a ghost, one no longer enmeshed in regular life. However, the hero, like *Bride*, is able to return. *Pecola*, like the ghost of the murdered child, is not.

9. Who are they, really?

Morrison's first and latest novels, and their female protagonists, do not neatly bookend her career and her meditations upon the position of the young Black female. There are, in the end, too many similarities between the characters, and too many gaps and vulnerabilities left in *Bride*. At one moment, she appears to have progressed far beyond what *Pecola* was capable of, but in the next, she is her doppelgänger. Mohsin and Taskeen, as noted, called *Bride* the ‘postmodern avatar’ of *Pecola Breedlove*. While I do not dispute the aptness of this metaphor, I would propose another: *Pecola*, who never successfully carried a child, has a granddaughter in *Bride*. A familial relationship across generations would explain both the startling similarities and the gulfs of difference between them.

Studies by Yehuda et al in 2001 show that PTSD is carried down in families; children of parents who were Holocaust survivors have a 33.3% chance of developing PTSD themselves (733). The pain, marginalization, and deprivation that exist in *Pecola* are also part of *Bride*, leaving traces that at times supersede her own experiences in a changed world. Walker makes reference to this phenomenon, noting that, after reading *God Help the Child*, she was left with the conclusion that, in the absence of positive intervention, “children become adults and carry with them a trauma imprinted on the body and memory”.

On the one hand, *Bride* fulfills the yearning that is in *Pecola*, to be beautiful, to be loved – all without the necessity of having blue eyes. On the surface, this is a vindication, but in fact it is still an

open question. For the story shows the vulnerability of those very aspirations. Following her rejection by Booker, it is uncertain whether she will be a bride, or indeed, whether she will be well.

By the end of the novel, her magnificent breasts have been restored to her, as has her health and her relationship with Booker. Moreover, she is pregnant. Yet everything still hangs in the balance. We are left with a sense of uneasiness after hearing Bride's story. In part this is due to the words of Sweetness, “God help the child”; will Bride and Booker manage to be loving parents, or will the cycle of neglect and abuse be perpetuated? In addition, we have seen the volatility of both Bride and Booker, the powerful effect they have on one another, their youth and their dependence, particularly Bride's dependence of Booker.

So the strength of Bride and the evolution that has occurred over 45 years with regard to the position of the young Black female subject is by no means certain, according to Morrison. Bride may indeed be “well”, but we have witnessed how easily she may not be. Perhaps the only optimism we can legitimately feel regarding the fate of Bride is the result of the uncertainty that Morrison allows in this story. Pecola's story was concluded early. By the age of 12, though she is still alive, there is no indication that she has survived; her entire consciousness is tied up in want of what she cannot have – blue eyes, love, acceptance, a baby. She will never have those things. Bride, on the other hand, is given the gift of uncertainty and therefore of hope. She may raise a healthy baby. Her story is not finished. We know, from *The Bluest Eye*, that to have a baby, “Somebody has to love you”. Someone might.

Bibliography

- Akhtar, Jaleel. *Toni Morrison and the New Black: Reading God Help the Child*. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Anderson, Melanie R. *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. University of Tennessee Press, 2013.
- Asnarey, Diana. "Treatment of the Theme of Child Abuse in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*". *ASA University Review* Vol 11 (1) 2017, pp. 51 - 60.
- Chanady, Amaryll Beatrice. *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1985. pg. 1
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. “Monster Culture (seven theories)”. From Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996 pp. 3 – 25.
- Deardoff, Daniel. “The Other Within: The Genius of Deformity in Myth, Culture and Psyche” North Atlantic Books 2009
- Duval, John N. "Invisible Name and Complex Identity in *The Bluest Eye*: Morrison's Covert Letter to Ralph Ellison". *The Identity Fictions of Toni Morrison*. Pp. 25 - 45
- Gras, Delphine. “Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*”. *Humanties* 2016 5(8), 80
- Lopez Ramirez, Manuela. "'Childhood Cuts Festered and Never Scabbed Over': Child Abuse in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*". *Alicante Journal of English Studies*. 2016 pp. 145 - 164
- Kuenz, Jane. “The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity”. *African American Review* Vol 27 (3) 1993 pp. 421 – 431
- Klotman, Phyllis R. “Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in *The Bluest Eye*.” *Black American Literature Forum* Vol. 13 (4) 1979 pp. 123 – 125
- Krupa, N. Dyva. "Racism and Religion in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*". *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature* Vol. 2 (1), 2015.
- Mohsin, Syed Wahaj and Taskeen, Shaista. “Meeting Lula Ann Bridewell as the Postmoder Avatar of Pecola Breedlove: A Comparative Study of female protagonists in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* and *The Bluest Eye*.” *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities* Vol 4 (8)
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House. 1970.
- Morrison, Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015 (ebook)
- Rajesh, V and Parveen, J. Jaya. "Double Consciousness in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: A Study. " *Research Scholar Journal*.
- Reyes, Beatriz Gonzalez. "Toni Morrison's Home: A Portrayal of the 1950s for African Americans". *Universidad de la Laguna*.

Walker, Kara. "Toni Morrison's God Help the Child". New York Times Book Review. April 13 2015.

Yehuda, R., Halligan, SL and Grossman, R. "Childhood trauma and risk for PTSD: relationship to intergenerational effects of trauma, parental PTSD and cortisol excretion. *Developmental Psychopathology* 2001 Summer; 13 (3): 733 – 53.