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SOME UNEXPECTED BUT CONSPICUOUS SHORTCOMINGS IN TONI MORRISON'S LAST NOVEL[1]

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ABSTRACT. *In the last five decades, Toni Morrison's fiction has covered such intricate topics as the impact of the past on the present, the damage produced on bodies and minds by different types of abuses, and the power and perils of small communities. She revisits some of those themes in her last novel,* God Help the Child *(2015), but this time zooms in more closely on the topics of child abuse and colorism – an internal racism of blacks against those with darker skin shades.* God Help the Child *proves innovative because the story is set in present-day fictional California, where the rate of child molestation – especially against black children – is just overwhelming. This article intends to show that, despite Morrison's audacious narrative form and storytelling skills, there are some evident shortcomings in the structure and characterization of the novel that are not to be found in her earlier works.*

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child*, narrative form, shortcomings, child abuse, color consciousness.

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ALGUNAS DIFICULTADES INESPERADAS, PERO NOTORIAS, DE LA ÚLTIMA NOVELA DE TONI MORRISON

RESUMEN. *Las novelas de Toni Morrison han abordado temas tan complejos como la influencia del pasado en el presente, las secuelas que distintos tipos de maltrato dejan en cuerpos y espíritus, y las bondades y peligros de las comunidades pequeñas. La autora retoma algunos de esos temas en su última novela,* La noche de los niños *(2015), pero se centra sobre todo en el maltrato de menores y el "colorismo" – un racismo interno de los afroamericanos hacia aquellos que tienen la piel más oscura. Lo novedoso de esta novela es que tiene lugar en la California actual, donde las cifras de abuso de menores – en especial de niños negros – son escalofriantes. El principal objetivo de este artículo es mostrar cómo, a pesar de la destreza y la audacia narrativa de Morrison, el lector descubre una serie de puntos débiles en la estructura y los personajes que son poco habituales en la autora.*

Palabras clave: Toni Morrison, *La noche de los niños*, forma narrativa, debilidades, maltrato infantil, conciencia de color.

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> The pity is that the book itself [*God Help the Child*] never struggles to answer the questions it poses and keeps these men at the margins. / There are many other characters I'd also like to know more about, whose strategies and coping mechanisms and pleasures I wanted to understand, but the novel withholds so much information.
>
> Kara Walker, "Flesh of My Flesh"

1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, who passed away in August 2019 at the age of 88, has been widely recognized as one of the most gifted African-American authors when it comes to portraying the experience of Black Americans. Through narrative voices which are at once compelling and vexing, Morrison depicted that experience at very distinct historical junctures. In the eleven novels she published over five decades, Morrison's fiction delved into intricate topics such as the pressure that a traumatic past exerts over the present time, the deep scars that all sorts of abuses leave on human bodies and minds, and the dangers and virtues of small rural communities. In all her novels, blackness is seen as a locus of pain and humiliation, but also of resilience and solidarity (see Mitchell 2014: 250-251).

Not only is she a master in depicting the Black experience, but her novels present her readers with arduous dilemmas, since she is likely to make them thick

with ellipses, discontinuities and both inner and external bedlam. As Linden Peach has rigthly explained, Morrison's oeuvre "extends the dimensions of narrative, [as] we have to place a greater value than previously on incompleteness, disruption, confusion, contradiction, internal inconsistencies and unfulfilled expectations" (1995: 20). In Peach's opinion, these features emerge to a great extent as a result of "the distortion of self created by the imposition of Euro-American cultural ideals on black people" (27).[2] This concern was ever-present in Morrison's earlier fiction and dictated not only the fate of many of her unforgettable characters but, also, the unusual structure of her narratives. Her last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), also delves into the consequences of the imposition of those white cultural ideals, but they are seen to receive a new treatment now that has somehow divided her audience.

Although *God Help the Child* resumes some of the prickly topics she had already dealt with, she focuses more closely here on the themes of child abuse and *colorism* – an internal racism shown by some African-Americans against those with darker skin color.[3] Obviously, this was not the first time that Morrison decided to scrutinize the issues of childhood traumas and their effects on adults. To mention just a few examples, one should recall Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon* (1977) or, more recently, Frank Money in *Home* (2012), all of whom lived through dreadful experiences in infancy that profoundly marked their lives. What seems new in *God Help the Child* is the fact that the main plot takes place in fictional contemporary California, where, to the surprise of most readers, the rate of children's exposure to physical violence and molestation – especially if they are black – is just astounding. This can be easily confirmed by looking at the figures published by the "National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence," which show that more than sixty percent of all children are victims of violence from birth to the age of seventeen and thirty-eight percent witness some type of violence during their childhood (National Center 2010). These rates skyrocket in the case of African-American children as "Black youth are three times more likely to be victims of reported child abuse or neglect, three times more likely to be victims of robbery, and five times more likely to be victims of homicide" (2010). In his book *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates offers all kinds of illustrative examples of how black bodies are humiliated, reduced, and destroyed from the tenderest stages of their childhood.

2 Many of the reviews of Morrison's works gathered in Nellie McKay's *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* refer very explicitly to the pernicious effects that the imposition and perpetuation of certain standards and values of the white society has had on the Black population – especially on Black women. See also Keita (2018: 44-48).

3 For a more thorough description of this type or racism, check Jakira M. Davis' (2015) MA thesis. This scholar focuses more specifically on the topic of colorism in African-American literature written by women, with special emphasis on the works of Morrison and Trethewey.

Nearly all the characters in Morrison's novel – be they black or white – have been victims of some form of misdeed during their childhoods and the *scars* left by those psychological wounds are most visible in the two protagonists: Lula Ann Bridewell (or just "Bride") and Booker Starbern.[4] As a young girl, Bride was the target of her mother's contempt and she suffered the prejudice of the latter's color-consciousness (or *colorism*) as a result of her lighter skin color, which prevented her from showing any warmth toward a girl "so black she scared me" (Morrison 2015: 3). Although Bride grows up to become a successful cosmetics designer, it is evident that she never managed to work through her mother's rejection and, every time she runs into any difficulty, her feelings of insecurity and vulnerability will resurface again (cf. López Ramírez 2017: 183). Likewise, Booker is also deeply agitated by a case of paedophilia and multiple murders which left him without his beloved elder brother, Adam, at a very early age. Due to his increasing resentment toward his family, deriving from their decision to move on with their lives after Adam's death, Booker is described by his aunt, Queen Olive as a "a leaver" (2015: 146).

As mentioned above, the reception of Morrison's novel has been evenly divided between those scholars and reviewers who have considered it "too contrived" and "frustratingly flawed" (see Charles 2015; Gay 2015; Hutchinson 2015) and those others who, like Kakutani, believe that "it attests to her ability to write intensely felt chamber pieces that inhabit a twilight world between fable and realism, and to convey the desperate yearnings of her characters for safety, and love, and belonging" (2015).[5] In a similar line, Martín-Salván praises "the revelatory structure of the novel" (2018: 610) concerning childhood traumas and racial tensions, while she also affirms that it retains Morrison's talent for disruption and lack of closure (621). On the other hand, Lionel Shriver contends in the *New Statesman* that *God Help the Child* lacks the moving, brave, and provocative qualities of her earlier works due to some arbitrary turns in its plot (2015). In a like manner, David Ulin argues that the novel "reads like a set of talking points, archetypes and illustrations, with little of the messy complexities of experience" (2015). In the pages below, some of the reasons that may explain such divergent judgments are considered to try to make a more accurate estimation of the overall literary merit of the novel.

4 The article by R. M. Prabha (2016) included in the list of references offers an in-depth analysis of the various types of abuses (physical, negligent, emotional, etc.) that these two characters suffer in Morrison's novel. Besides, Prabha revisits several earlier works by Morrison in which the abuse of children is also significantly dwelt upon.

5 For another positive appraisal of *God Help the Child*, see Charlotte Anrig's article in the *Harvard Crimson* (2015). This critic underlines the immense dexterity with which Morrison represents the damaged psychology of abuse victims, as well as the terrible consequences of this type of crime on its sufferers.

Thus, the main aim of this article is to demonstrate that, despite the unquestionable narrative skill of the author, which becomes evident in her audacity to use very different styles – with constant shifts in point of view and language register – one must come to the conclusion that the themes covered in the novel are far too complex and intricate to be fully explored in this slim volume. As Bride's mother – who, ironically, prefers to be called "Sweetness" instead of "mom" by her daughter – finally admits in a revealing passage of the novel: "What you do to children matters. And they might never forget" (43). As the next section of the article shows, this is one of the central ideas that *God Help the Child* tries to establish most intently. Nevertheless, as Ellen Akins has observed, although this is the kind of material of which great novels are made, "here it seems cursory, a slapdash admixture of plot and explanation with the occasional redeeming image or burst of inspired language" (2015). The third part of this article contemplates the unstable balance the reader experiences between the indisputable virtues of the writing and the conspicuous shortcomings of the narrative.[6] In the closing section, some final conclusions about these tensions are drawn.

2. A FEW NOTES ON THE INNOVATIVE ELEMENTS IN *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

As mentioned earlier on and as the very title of the novel suggests, Morrison has decided to focus her attention on the theme of child abuse and maltreatment. Prabha notes that "In Morrison's last novel, many mothers are seen to be neglecting their children. Child abuse cuts a sharp wound through Morrison's *God Help the Child*. The novel is a brisk modern day tale with shades of the imaginative cruelties visited on children" (2016: 23). What is most disturbing to the reader is that practically no character is free from the deep psychological wounds inflicted on their personality by some harrowing incidents they experienced during their infancy.[7] These incidents may range from the emotional blackmail and negligence of parents to the most gruesome instances of physical and sexual violence. Readers are dismayed by the realization that the ramifications of the problem often spread into the most recondite places of the characters' minds in such a way that no home or family can be considered a safe haven for even the youngest children. Nevertheless, what is unique about this novel is that the writer does not put much

6 Kathryn Kulpa has also noted that although reviews of the novel were generally respectful, they were also rather mixed in nature with some critics underlining its strengths in dealing with very contemporary topics, while others complained that those topics were clearly "under explored" (2016: 230).

7 Ron Charles (2015), David Ulin (2015) and other reviewers of the novel have all claimed that it is a bit "suspicious" that none of the main characters of the novel has had a happy childhood, which could make the readers surmise that there is a degree of "authorial manipulation" in bringing all those troubled lives together within the same narrative.

emphasis on racial difference, at least concerning the degree of vulnerability of the different families regarding these types of aggressions. This means that the innocence of white children is as threatened by these despicable conducts as that of black minors and, in this regard, the examples of Brooklyn, Bride's colleague at Sylvia, Inc., and Rain are really illuminating. While it is true that racial prejudice may still emerge in the activities of those adults in charge of the protection of the children's safety – teachers, nurses, police officers, etc.–, Morrison understands that it is other factors such as poverty, social exclusion, religious fanaticism or other social disgraces that most significantly underpin this problem (cf. Drake *et al.* 2011).[8]

In Evelyn Schreiber's opinion, the burden of the cultural trauma caused by slavery is present in Morrison's earlier novels and "characters in various generations work through personal and contextual layers in unique ways" (2010: 1-2). It seems undeniable that in works such as *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987) circumstances force most of the characters to struggle against the blatant signs of hate, exploitation and racial segregation to which they are exposed as a result of their skin color at different historical junctures. Sam Durrant has said on this point that "Underneath the dark skin that is the biological signifier of race lurks the racial memory of having been identified as less than human, a memory that lodges itself in the flesh precisely because it is a memory of having been reduced to flesh" (2004: 96). Logically, one would expect things to be significantly different in a novel set in California – probably the most multiethnic and diverse state in the US[9] – at the outset of the 21st century. Thus, when Bride tells Booker about her mother's preference for lighter skin shades, he retorts rather offended that "Scientifically there is 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" (2015: 143). Since this kind of knowledge is now generally accepted and substantial social changes have taken place since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (cf. Chafe 2003: 481-524), it is evident that the burden of the historical-cultural trauma that the protagonists of *God Help the Child* may carry is surely much lighter. Nevertheless, they are faced with several related

8 In the article "Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*", Delphine Gras contends that, although the plot of Morrison's novel takes place in a supposedly post-racial historical period, the fact is that the female black body is still at this time the main victim of abuses and reification. As Gras states, "the legacy of slavery still dictates the way Black female bodies are seen and treated in twenty-first-century America" (2016: 1).

9 For more information on this topic, see Lee Hubbarb's article on the rapidly increasing ethnic diversity of the State of California included in the References. This journalist focuses his attention on the growing presence of minority groups in domains such as education, politics, and the media, all of which have substantial incidence on the power structures.

problems that they are compelled to wrestle with and that they find formidable to overcome (see Keita 2018: 49-52).

When one examines the cases of Bride and Booker, it is clear that skin color is at the very root of the childhood traumas that they endure. Mashaqi and Al Omari maintain in their analysis of the novel that it "shows how black people, and children in particular, are still suffering from marginalization in the modern American society" (2018: 178). On the one hand, Lula Ann Bridewell is rejected by her parents when she is still a baby due to her extremely obsidian skin color: "Midnight black. Sudanese black" (3). Bride's mother, Sweetness, is deeply infected by the notion – still extant among some African-Americans – that a distinctly black skin color is a signifier of an inferior and subsidiary social standing.[10] As soon as Bride is born, her mother is convinced that her life will never be the same thereafter: "It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong!" (3). And, of course, this turns out to be some sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, since from that very moment Sweetness is going to be distrusted and, eventually, abandoned by her husband. He wrongly assumes that his wife has been unfaithful to him, and Sweetness's life takes an implacable downturn. Each time her voice is heard in the novel, it is to air her excuses and guilty feelings concerning the reasons that pushed her to treat Lula Ann in such a cold manner and to avoid displaying any sign of love or affection toward her at all costs. But, of course, there was an astonishing social pressure to pass for a particular type of Black:

> Some of you probably think it's a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color—the lighter, the better—in social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we hold on to a little dignity? How else can you avoid being spit on in a drugstore, shoving elbows at the bus stop, walking in the gutter to let whites have the whole sidewalk, charged a nickel at the grocer's for a paper bag that's free to white shoppers? Let alone all the name-calling. (4)

On the other hand, Booker Starbern also lives under the unbearable burden of his childhood memories inevitably linked to the kidnapping and subsequent murder of his elder brother at the hands of a pedophile. Thinking about the horrors that Adam must have gone through before his kidnapper and abuser put an end to his life only makes the misery of his loss even worse. But two key circumstances need to be borne in mind to understand the true extent of his grief. What makes Booker exasperated is the reaction that he observes in the authorities and the community as a whole when his brother goes missing: "When the police

10 For additional information about this little-known social phenomenon, see the Introduction and the first chapter of Jakira M. Davis' MA thesis (2015: 1-16). Davis moves on to analyze the effects of colorism on Black women's self-image as shown in different literary works.

responded to their plea for help in searching for Adam, they immediately searched the Starberns' house—as though the anxious parents might be at fault. They checked to see if the father had a police record. He didn't. 'We'll get back to you,' they said. Then they dropped it. Another little black boy gone. So?" (114). Another aspect that Booker has trouble accepting is the semblance of normalcy that his own family fabricate just a few weeks after they have attended Adam's funeral. He cannot understand how his parents and his siblings can even think of returning to their daily activities and resume their family routines – "Booker thought their joking strained and their made-up problems both misguided and insulting" (116-17) –, when he himself is going through a true nightmare. Thus, it is not surprising that years later, when the molester and serial murderer has been arrested and Booker is studying at university, he feels utterly alienated from his family and decides to sever the weakened ties that kept him connected to them: "When he visited his and Adam's old bedroom, the thread of disapproval he'd felt during his proposal of a memorial [to his murdered brother] became a rope, as he saw the savage absence not only of Adam but of himself. So when he shut the door on his family and stepped out into the rain it was an already belated act" (125).

Both Bride and Booker leave their respective families behind – one to become an executive in a cosmetics firm and the other to turn into an intellectual and occasional musician – when they realize that their childhood traumas are a burden too heavy to carry.[11] After they meet accidentally and fall for each other almost instantly, they remain together for six months during which their lives are replete with pleasures that would have been previously inconceivable. Nevertheless, the romance comes to an unexpected and sudden conclusion when Booker abruptly decides to leave after telling Bride: "You not the woman I want" (8). This happens soon after Bride informs him that she was preparing some gifts for to a child abuser who was being released from prison after completing a long sentence. In the closing paragraph of this section, more space will be devoted to the role played by this alleged criminal, Sofia Huxley, in Bride's life. As the novel moves on, it becomes increasingly clear that the chasm stretching between the two lovers is intimately related to the traumas that they both suffered in infancy. Neither of them seems to have fully recovered from them and the rest of the novel recounts their strenuous efforts to heal those wounds and to come together again, despite their mutual resentment. As Walton Muyumba rightly points out, "the characters Bride and Booker must learn how to draw up *their* respective

11 Morrison's novel may be read as a paradigmatic example of what has been referred to these last few decades as *trauma fiction*. Both in terms of content and form, *God Help the Child* contains many of the ingredients that the reader expects to find in this type of literature: repressed memories, unhealed psychological wounds, guilty feelings, etc. See also Keita, who argues that "love and loss constitute the fulcrum of the traumatic experiences of Bride and Booker" (2018: 48).

womanhood and manhood in order to fulfill the promise of their affair" (2015; emphasis in original).

However, as has been observed previously, the cases of children who have been either victims or witnesses of abuses are not restricted to the main characters, nor to any definite racial group. Brooklyn, Bride's best friend and closest co-worker at the cosmetics company, is a very revealing example. Her predator was "hiding" in her own home – which is quite typical in cases of child abuse, as the data gathered in poor neighborhoods of urban areas show (National Center 2010). Brooklyn feels really proud of a gift that she has had since she was a little girl, which consists of being able to foresee how people are going to behave under certain circumstances: "Like when the landlady stole the money lying on our dining room table and said we were behind in the rent. Or when my uncle started thinking of putting his fingers between my legs again, even before he knew himself what he was planning to do" (139). As is to be expected, like many other characters in the novel, Brooklyn chooses to pull out of her dysfunctional family when she is an adolescent, for she realizes that her possibilities of coming out unharmed from such a noxious context are practically nil: "I ran away, too, Bride, but I was fourteen and there was nobody but me to take care of me so I invented myself, toughened myself. I thought you did too except when it came to boyfriends" (140). This last comment shows her resentment of Bride's decision to begin her life anew with Booker.

When Bride finally decides to go in search of Booker – using an overdue notice from a pawn and repair shop –, she has a car accident on a dark and scarcely-traveled rural road, and a white girl called Rain helps her. Bride has broken her ankle in the crash and needs to stay with Rain's surrogate parents, a pair of hippies named Steve and Evelyn, for a month and a half.[12] During this period of time, Bride becomes Rain's best friend and confidant, and she hears how the girl's mother forced her into prostitution until she hurt one of her mother's clients at the age of six and Rain was thrown out of the house: "'He stuck his pee thing in my mouth and I bit it. So she apologized to him, gave back his twenty-dollar bill and made me stand outside.' […] 'She wouldn't let me back in. I kept pounding on the door. She opened it once to throw me my sweater'" (101-2). Like in Brooklyn's case, Rain was also a victim of her closest kin. Despite Steve's and Evelyn's best efforts to assist Rain in recovering from those terrible experiences at home and, later, on the streets, it is apparent that the girl has serious problems

12 In his review of Morrison's novel in *The Telegraph*, Leo Robson (2015) reads the book through a mythical-symbolic prism, establishing a cogent connection with Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*. Obviously, it is in this part of the novel, when Bride is outside her natural milieu, that her transformation – both physical and psychological – accelerates and becomes most apparent.

communicating with them, so Bride comes as a new opportunity for her to be able to express her intense pain: "She's a cat now and I tell her everything. My black lady listens to me tell how it was" (104).[13]

Last but not least, there is also the case of Sofia Huxley, a Primary School teacher who was accused by Bride and a group of other children of molesting some of her students. Nevertheless, the reader soon realizes that Bride's accusation was false and that she was just trying to attract her mother's attention after so many years of neglect. As she was still very immature and in so much need of her mother's affection, Lula Ann testified against Huxley during the latter's trial, without fully realizing the serious consequences of this step. Fifteen years later and after having barely managed to survive in prison, it is not surprising that Sofia should react the way she does to Bride's visit and her attempt to amend the mistake she made as a girl: "I blanked. My fists took over as I thought I was battling the Devil. Exactly the one my mother always talked about—seductive but evil. As soon as I threw her out and got rid of her Satan's disguise, I curled up into a ball on the bed and waited for the police" (70). What seems most interesting about this violent episode is the torrent of memories that return to the former teacher – which include scoldings and punishments – in a home where her parents were true religious zealots. The long list of adults who were maltreated as children in the novel could be made even longer. *God Help the Child* offers more than enough evidence to attest that, as many experts have concluded, "the trauma children experience when they are exposed to physical, sexual, and emotional violence harms their ability to mature cognitively and emotionally, and it scars them physically and emotionally well into their adult lives" (Defending Children 2012: ii).

3. STRENGTHS AND SOME EVIDENT SHORTCOMINGS IN MORRISON'S LAST NOVEL

Although the later novels by Toni Morrison seem rather short and modest in comparison with some of her earlier works of fiction, several reviewers contended that they are still able "to pack an emotional wallop" and they show "a new urgency […] to tell the story itself, without embellishment and ornamentation" (Umrigar 2015: np). Surely, that urgency is manifest in *God Help the Child*, since the writer manages to squeeze many of the horrors of the childhood traumas of at least seven characters in under two hundred pages. There is little need to clarify that the difficult theme itself requires the crude language and highly-emotional

13 Several reviewers (Gay 2015; Moore 2015: 70) have argued that the relationship between Bride and Rain is only very shallowly and vaguely sketched in the novel so that the mutual trust that they develop in that short stretch of time seems rather unconvincing. Others have read it as just a fairy tale or a fable (see López Ramírez 2017: 174-176).

style that Morrison uses throughout most of the novel. In order to capture the experiences of those deeply-hurt characters – and to do it often in their own words –, high levels of terseness and precision become necessary. And yet, as will be seen below, the reader frequently has the impression that many of the characters and their profound changes in the novel would have called for more space and elaboration in order to be properly developed. In this regard, Muyumba and other analysts have complained that "with so many speedy narrative turns, the author risks missing some requisite details" (2015).

By quickening and significantly compressing the action of the novel, Morrison is giving up a substantial part of the narrative talent that characterized most of her earlier works. Still, scattered throughout the novel, notable instances of the author's storytelling skills emerge which provide a few gleams of light and warmth to a mostly dark and sinister story about the pain accumulated by characters whose sense of selfhood has been severely damaged. One example takes place when we are told Booker's recollections of the last time he saw his adored brother, Adam, just before he was kidnapped by the child molester who eventually killed him:

> The last time Booker saw Adam he was skateboarding down the sidewalk in twilight, his yellow T-shirt fluorescent under the Northern Ash trees. It was early September and nothing anywhere had begun to die. Maple leaves behaved as though their green was immortal. Ash trees were still climbing toward a cloudless sky. The sun began turning aggressively alive in the process of setting. Down the sidewalk between hedges and towering trees Adam floated, a spot of gold moving down a shadowy tunnel toward the mouth of a living sun. (115)

Curiously, some of these mesmerizing passages crop up in Part III of the novel – the section recounting Booker's backstory –, which is narrated from an omniscient third-person perspective. This is partly predictable because this section is not so affected by the turbulences that trammel the narrations of most of the characters. As Muyumba sees it, "Booker's narrative is the novel's most accomplished section. Few writers, regardless of gender, can address the vagaries of black masculinity as sensitively, insightfully, and elegantly as Morrison" (2015). Analogous examples of the sensitivity and lucidity with which the author handles the tribulations of Black masculinity can be found both in *Song of Solomon* and *Home*. While it is true that Morrison's bewitching use of the language becomes most apparent in this part of the book, it must be admitted that the other sections – narrated by Sweetness, Bride, Brooklyn, Sofia and Rain – manage to successfully capture many of the nuances of the different characters' changing emotions. Some reviewers (Kakutani 2015; Evaristo 2015) have praised the author's ability to get under the characters' skin and to render their experiences in highly idiosyncratic language registers. For instance, the indignation that Sofia feels in prison, when

she realizes that child abusers – which, of course, she is *not* – are perceived as the worst possible criminals, becomes apparent in the following passage:

> We were at the bottom of the heap of murderers, arsonists, drug dealers, bomb-throwing revolutionaries and the mentally ill. Hurting little children was their idea of the lowest of the low—which is a hoot since the drug dealers could [*sic*] care less about who they poison or how old they were and the arsonists didn't separate the children from the families they burned. And bomb throwers are not selective or known for precision. (66)

In spite of the unquestionable relevance and momentousness of the theme and the diverse perspectives on it present in the text, the reader may feel at different stages of the plot that Morrison is forcing the situations in order to get her message across ("What you do to children matters" [43]) more clearly. For instance, the sections in which Sweetness and Bride squabble about the motives that spurred the former to show such a cold attitude toward her daughter and the effects that such behavior had on the latter may sound rather factitious. As Earl Hutchison has remarked, "The parade of contrivances continues [later on in the novel] with a car accident in which Bride winds up in the woods in the company of hippie outcasts. These tragedies are so grossly exaggerated that you need a scoreboard to try and make sense of where this is going" (2015). Obviously, the fact that most of the characters carry the heavy burden of their respective pasts, as well as their difficulty in reacting to the behaviors and words of others in more natural ways, may help us accept some of these occurrences and unlikely coincidences. Nonetheless, the reader may still feel that some of the essential traits of the characters are not sufficiently dwelt upon and that many of their reactions would have deserved much more exhaustive treatment.[14] For example, one is quite astonished by Brooklyn's adverse attitude toward Booker from the beginning of the novel – even before the latter rejects her sexual advances – or, perhaps even more confounding, there is Sweetness's fixation with darker skin colors, which surfaces recurrently in the novel: "I wasn't a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges. At first I couldn't see past all that black to know who she was and just plain love her. But I do. I really do" (43). The scarcity of important information regarding the past of most of the central characters does not help the reader much in terms of establishing the motivations and the radical transformations that they are seen to undergo throughout the story. In this regard,

14 Several reviewers of the book (Charles 2015; Robson 2015) have concurred that, while it is true that the author's intention of trying to understand her characters is one of the main engines of the narrative, in the end it becomes one of its major weaknesses as it is evident that in most instances her explanations of "the causes and motives tend towards simplicity" (Robson 2015).

Gay concludes her review in *The Guardian* stating that "*God Help the Child* is the kind of novel where you can feel the magnificence just beyond your reach. […] The story carries the shape of a far grander book, where the characters are more fully explored and there is far more at stake" (2015).

Probably, Sweetness's consternation upon witnessing how people react when they first see her baby girl would have needed some clarification about the antecedents that have turned her into the woman she is, deeply conscious of her skin color: "I did the best I could and didn't take her outside much anyway because when I pushed her in the baby carriage, friends and strangers would lean down and peek in to say something nice and then give a start or jump back before frowning. That hurt" (6). The reader could assume that Sweetness's perceptions are biased by some prejudice she must have developed in the past, but even if that were so, her distortions of reality still seem a bit preposterous.[15] The same thing may be said about the close bond that is built between Bride and Rain in just a few weeks, which could be partly explained by the fact that both of them have gone through harrowing experiences in the past. And yet, once again, a more meticulous analysis of their friendship would have been desirable to really understand why Bride should decide, without much hesitation, to risk her own life in order to protect Rain's from the attack of some rednecks: "My black lady saw him and threw her arm in front of my face. The birdshot messed up her hand and arm. We fell, both of us, her on top of me. I saw Regis duck down as the truck gunned its engine and shot off" (105).

On the other hand, it is also quite inevitable to consider the inclusion of a number of elements of magical realism in the novel, which have given rise to rather divergent responses among critics. Readers are quite amazed to discover that, soon after Booker decides to abandon her life abruptly, Bride's body begins to show symptoms of metamorphosing into that of a young girl: she loses her pubic hair, the tiny holes in her ears disappear, her breast becomes flatter, etc. "Had her ankle not prohibited it, she would have run, rocketed away from the scary suspicion that she was changing back into a little black girl" (97). Evidently, this physical regression could be symbolically interpreted as the reemergence of some of the traumas that she had lived through as a girl (cf. López Ramírez 2017: 183). As a matter of fact, the protagonist keeps discovering these changes in her physiognomy as memories from her infancy, which had been long dormant or repressed, return to her during her recuperation from the accident. But Ellen Akins

15 Fernanda Moore (2015) and other analysts have indicated that many of the inconsistencies they find in the novel derive precisely from these highly subjective – and generally biased – judgments that many of the characters make of reality. From these readers' perspective, these characters sometimes seem to live in utterly different fictional worlds.

has viewed these forays into the *uncanny* as rather "opportunistic" (Akins 2015), since they do not appear to be sufficiently integrated into the different sections narrated by Bride in the novel. According to Charles, in a like manner, while in prior works by Morrison the supernatural elements and "surreal touches seem evocative and weirdly natural", in this novel they become "clunky symbols" that are quite often "needlessly explained" (2015).[16] These elements have very little to do with the superb use of magical realism in novels such as *Song of Solomon* or *Beloved*, in which the supernatural elements are linked to the collective consciousness of her people and to her attempts to enhance the readers' perception of reality and history (see Simal 1997: 317-318).

To conclude this section, it must be said that whereas there are aspects of the plot which the author reiterates – sometimes almost obsessively –, there are other key questions that remain only shallowly examined and that somehow cripple the structure of the novel. Even though at the outset of this article certain discontinuities and ellipses in Morrison's narratives were praised as one of her greatest contributions to the development of fiction writing in recent times, the aforementioned *slights* seem to be of a different nature here. Rather than enticing the reader to complete aspects of the plot that have intentionally been left inconclusive, what readers encounter in *God Help the Child* is a series of incongruities that make them have doubts about the cohesion and verisimilitude of the story. Several episodes could be appraised here with a view to illustrating this point: there is Sofia Huxley's trial for child abuse or the protagonist's, Lula Ann Bridewell's, pregnancy near the end of the novel. It has already been mentioned that Bride's statement against her teacher during the trial was a lie that she invented in order to gain her mother's affection: "I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her but she didn't do any of that. I wanted to make amends but she beat the crap out of me and I deserved it" (153). But, what the novel never clarifies is what pushed the other children to lie in their depositions as well: Were all of them also victims of traumas similar to those of Lula Ann? How does one explain that sort of collective hysteria – other mothers call her "devil" and "bitch" (16) during the court action – if she was innocent? Even more perplexing is the question of Bride's pregnancy, for it determines to a great extent the happy ending of the novel. Once Booker has scattered Queen's, his rebel aunt's, ashes into the brook, and after holding an informal ceremony in her honor, he walks back to Bride's Jaguar, where she manages to gather enough courage to confess that she is pregnant: "You heard me. I'm pregnant and it's yours" (174). Most readers

16 In her review of the novel in *The New York Times*, Kara Walker (2015) also complains about certain "moralizing" and didactic detonations present in it. Furthermore, this author finds it rather strange that the changes experienced by Bride's body throughout the story are only perceived by the protagonist, without any of the other characters apparently noticing those striking transfigurations.

would read this sudden revelation as a culmination of the recovery process of their damaged identities that both protagonists have experienced – assisted by Queen Olive – in the last stretch of the novel (see López Rámirez 2017: 186). However, this reading would overlook some important incidents in the early stages of the story that seriously problematize that "happy ending" of the novel. On the one hand, there is Bride's revengeful attitude and behavior after Booker abandons her: "My life is falling down. I'm sleeping with men whose names I don't know and not remembering any of it. What's going on? I'm young; I'm successful and pretty. Really pretty, so there! Sweetness. So why am I so miserable?" (53). Bride's confused reaction to Booker's leaving does not only throw some doubt on the paternity of the baby that she carries in her womb, but it also shows the depth of the wounds that both of them sustain, and which are likely to reopen again at any moment. Queen's reflections regarding the future of the couple – in the light of her own experiences as a mother of several children – could be read in this sense as sort of premonitory:

> They will blow it, she thought. 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. […] Youth being the excuse for that fortune-cookie love—until it wasn't, until it became pure adult stupidity. (158)

4. CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the aforementioned weaknesses and inconsistencies, it must be admitted that Toni Morrison showed great ambition and audacity in trying to tackle difficult issues that, besides being very urgent under the current circumstances, also demand a profound knowledge and understanding of the complexities of the human mind. In this regard, there is no denying that there are passages of *God Help the Child* which demonstrate the author's high aspirations both in terms of the themes she explores and the narrative and stylistic qualities of the writing. Bernardine Evaristo has claimed that her writing is "as fresh, adventurous and vigorous as ever" and that her "new novel challenges the assumption that writers lose their mojo once they reach a great age" (2015). The description of the beginning of the fire at Queen's mobile home provides a good idea of the merits of those gifts:[17]

17 This passage is full of reverberations of the scene in *Sula* in which the dress of the protagonist's mother, Hannah, bursts into flames when she is trying to light a fire. One can easily observe the consistency of Morrison's style by comparing both prose passages.

> It began slowly, gently, as it often does: shy, unsure of how to proceed, fingering its way, slithering tentatively at first because who knows how it might turn out, then gaining confidence in the ecstasy of air, of sunlight, for there was neither in the weeds where it had curled.
>
> It had been lurking in the yard where Queen Olive had burned bedsprings to destroy the annual nests of bedbugs. Now it traveled quickly, flashing now and then a thin red lick of flame, then dying down for seconds before springing up again stronger, thicker, now that the way and the goal were clear: a tasty length of pine rotting at the trailer's pair of back steps. Then the door, more pine, sweet, soft. Finally there was the joy of sucking delicious embroidered fabric of lace, of silk, of velvet. (164)

Very few writers have the talent to penetrate the minds and the yearnings of the characters, and even of some objects – the fire, in this case –, revealing the kind of understanding and empathy that Morrison demonstrates in these lines. Not only is the fire described here as possessing a mind of its own, with all its cautions and delights, but it is turned into one of the key figures in this part of the novel, making an important turning point in the plot.

In the same line, it is also unquestionable that Morrison has great dexterity in structuring her works in such a way that the messages she wishes to convey become crystal clear. The denouement of this novel, for example, is fraught with all the nuances and ambiguity that characterize her best fiction, since after Bride tells Booker about her pregnancy, the reader feels both the impulse to interpret this fact as an evident sign of new hopes for the couple and the temptation to see the shadows that Sweetness seems to throw on the revelation: "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. / So they believe" (175). The novel concludes with Sweetness's reflections on her own mistakes as a mother and the foreseeable difficulties that Bride, her daughter, is going to face in that same role in the future: "If you think mothering is all cooing, booties and diapers you are in for a big shock. Big. You and your nameless boyfriend, husband, pickup—whoever—imagine OOOH! A baby! Kitchee kitchee koo!" (178).

Despite all the flashes of narrative inventiveness and the undeniable power that the novel reveals, it would be inaccurate – and uncritical – not to recognize that there are sections of the book which rush to rather simple-minded explanations and use clichéd metaphors to substantiate some of the unexpected twists in the plot. As some experts and reviewers have remarked, the book is more like a sketch drawn by bringing together improvised brushstrokes than a thoroughly designed and deeply meditated artwork (cf. Akins 2015; Gay 2015). In Lionel Shriver's opinion, what could have become a superb long novella, "proceeds

with a peculiar aimlessness, even arbitrariness, leaving the strong impression that this and that were simply made up willy-nilly and didn't hew to an overarching purpose" (2015). Even though some specialists have said that *God Help the Child* could be viewed as an attempt on the author's part to make her oeuvre come full circle (Evaristo 2015), by revisiting many of the themes that she had already explored in her earliest works, it is impossible not to notice that her last novel is plagued by certain weaknesses that were not previously present. Bearing in mind Morrison's felicitous reputation and her huge stature as a writer, with a remarkable career of over forty years, it is not easy to decipher what sort of influences – personal, editorial, cultural or of a different kind – may have interfered in the making and publication of *God Help the Child* to cause some unexpected weaknesses. What seems undeniable is that her last novel exhibits a number of imperfections that may baffle the most attentive readers, even if it still retains some of the recognizable features of her narratives.

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