UiT The Arctic University of Norway

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"No funk" – shame, violence and the black body

An investigation of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and God Help the Child

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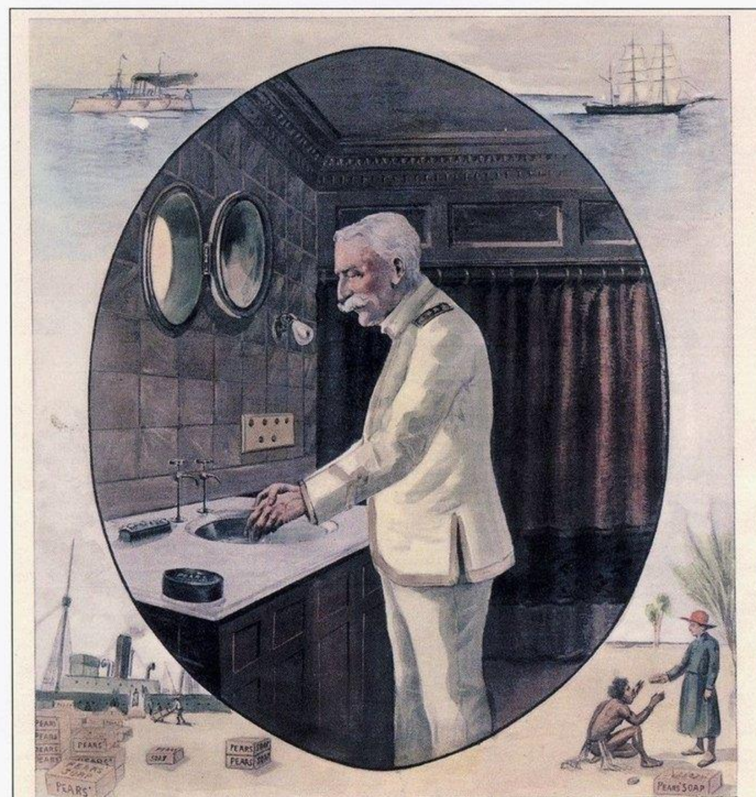
I have always been intrigued by language and African American history and my two main points of interest come together in Toni Morrison's poetic narratives about the struggle for self-love and emancipation of the black identity and body. It is a true privilege to work with such wonderful fiction as Morrison's. A big thank you goes to my advisor Laura Castor for her friendly energy and pragmatic attitude.



Chapter 1
Introduction

This thesis will provide an analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *God Help the Child* (2015). I will look at Morrison's first and last novel in light of historical context and gothic literary tropes, with the main focus on shame and the black body, violence and the inheritance of shame in families. I will show how an intertextual gothic reading of characters highlights the structural problems of racism in the shadow of slavery and racist violence.

I chose these two novels because they double each other in relation to both message and characters, and they form the start and the conclusion of Morrison's Nobel-prize winning body of work. I also find it interesting how they discuss the difficulties children, and particularly girls, face in a racist world that over the two narratives spans more than 70 years. My methodical approach is close reading of passages and characters in the two novels, and I will also draw some parallels to other works by Morrison. My theoretical framework is current gothic and African American literary theory, historical context and Morrison's own academic writing.

Gothic fiction has many distinguishing features, several of which can be found in Morrison's two novels: Violence, rape, fear, horror, death, madness, bodily functions, sexuality, "the Other" and filth are well-known gothic tropes. The dichotomy of filth versus purity is also a common trope in gothic literature and even more so in the American and African American gothic, with its backdrop of the transatlantic slave trade and Native American wars. This dichotomy is important for the main characters in both *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child,* as it takes the form of madness in the former and denial in the latter.

First, I take a close look at the two novels separately in light of gothic tropes and internalized shame, and in Chapter 3 I look at inherited shame, representations of violence and the doubling of characters from the two novels. Morrison's narrative resistance to systemic racist shaming finishes off my thesis.

1.1. Toni Morrison – scholar, teacher and author

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio in 1931. She was surrounded by stories, songs and folklore of the black community from an early age. She graduated with an MA from Cornell at age 24 and went on to build a very successful career, starting as a teacher at the renowned historically black Howard university. Her master's thesis was titled "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's treatment of the alienated", and she continued to write about black people objectified as "the Other" her entire career. After the breakup of her marriage she moved with her two sons to New York and became the first black female editor in the fiction department at the giant publishing house Random House. She introduced the world to many great black writers and has since influenced and paved the way for black literature in both academia and mainstream popular culture.

The Bluest Eye (hereafter referred to as *TBE*) from 1970 may not be as well-known or widely praised as some of Morrison's later works, like *Beloved* or *Song of Solomon.* However, it set Morrison off on a literary and academic journey that formed her career as professor and critic of English literature, a Pulitzer Prize and last, but not least, the 1993 Nobel Prize of Literature. The Nobel committee described her as an author "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality" (NobelPrize.org). She rounded off her fiction bibliography with her 2015 novel *God Help the Child* (hereafter referred to as *GHTC*) and died in 2019 in New York.

Morrison's insight into black communities, the human psyche and social psychology invites her readers to question both inter- and intrapersonal norms of society. Her background as a scholar is obvious in her works, she uses both history, sociology and psychology to underline the messages in her books. In *TBE* she shows us the racist problems surrounding American society and not least the media's portrayal of "physical beauty. Probably the most destructive [idea] in the history of human thought" (95). This idea of racially based physical beauty follows my thesis from beginning to end, in both the disappointed housewives and broken girl of *The Bluest Eye* and in the superficial false identity of *God Help the Child*'s main character. Morrison ends her chapter on the color fetish in *The Origin of Others* by summing up

the work she has done in all her novels, and she notes that her effort may not be something that is cherished or recognized by other black authors: “After decades of struggle to write powerful narratives portraying decidedly black characters, they may wonder if I am engaging in literary white-washing. I am not. [….] But I am determined to de-fang cheap racism, annihilate and discredit the routine, easy, available color fetish, which is reminiscent of slavery itself” (53). Morrison is a scholar as well as a writer and her nonfiction work is often centered around the systemic racism that the “othering” of the African American is based on.

Literary scholar and professor J. Brooks Bouson is among those who praise Morrison’s writing:

> Morrison’s novels force readers into uncomfortable confrontations with the dirty business of racism. […] people [have a tendency to] turn away from the shameful and traumatic. […] Morrison, in her intellectually fascinating but also emotionally disturbing works of art, draws her readers into her fictional worlds, urging them to understand and also respond viscerally to the painful race matters that she bears witness to in her art. (Bouson Preface)

Nowhere are the painful race matters that Bouson addresses more acute than in the story of 11-year-old Pecola and her descent into madness and violation by her peers, her family and a racist society.

Pecola’s failure of coping with internalized shame is described by many psychologists, it is a common outcome of for instance combat induced PTSD and child abuse. Some of the characters in the two novels direct their anger outward, while others focus it inward. To avoid reexperiencing the trauma of the induced shame, some victims turn to rage. Each moment of anger directed in this manner can provide a powerful distraction from experiencing shame or the feelings that may accompany it. “Shame, like guilt and embarrassment, involves negatively judging ourselves when we believe we’ve failed to live up to either our own standards or the standards of other people” (Golden 2017). Pecola and Cholly are two extremes, where one turns her shame inwards and one lashes out and destroys his surroundings. In *God Help the Child* rage and denial are coping mechanisms for the main characters. In *The Bluest*

Eye, Morrison illustrates all the levels on which racism plays, as it seeps into the minds of children, pop culture and the powerful media machine, schools and into the houses and living rooms of every member of society.

1.2. The American gothic

The gothic tradition grew from the Romantic era in the late 18th century and was born when politician and author Horace Walpole in 1764 pretended to "find" the manuscript for the "Italian" tale *The Castle of Otranto*. In reality he wrote it himself. The novel centers around a lord's family and includes well-known gothic elements like death, maidens in distress, castles, ancient prophecies, knights and ghosts. Gothic novels, though very popular, were initially - bar a few exceptions - neither well respected nor praised by critics. They were the popular pulp fiction of the era, "an arouser of the fears instigated by visible conflicts between retrogressive and progressive views of the world" (Hogle 4). For following the Enlightenment's sense of order, education and civilized aestheticism, "manifestations of the Gothic past – buildings, ruins, songs and romances – were treated as products of uncultivated if not childlike minds" (Botting 22). People's need for a link to the past and for an escapist imagination in the midst of an enlightened and intellectual present, made the Middle Ages' love of chivalry and romance flower again in gothic novels in the 18th century. Walpole's PR stunt birthed a genre that includes works by the Brontë sisters, Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, du Maurier, Flannery O'Connor and Toni Morrison.

The windswept moors, ruins and dark castles of the British Isles and the European gothic was not something that the later American gothic adopted: "The grand gloom of European Gothic was inappropriate, the commonplace of American culture was full of little mysteries and guilty secrets" (Botting 23). The Americans were haunted by more familial surroundings – the home, the city, the family, the past and the uncertainty of the future in a new and enormous homeland. The villains were more human, the city more homely and the horrors more realistic – the gothic drew closer to home. America's history of slavery, war and racism made society and the darkness of the city itself parts of the narratives.

In *African American Gothic - Screams from Shadowed Places* Wester explains the gothic as

> a series of tropes and themes used to meditate upon a culture's various anxieties, particularly through discourses of Otherness. Notably, the gothic is mutable, shifting to accommodate the changing ideals and questions of its culture. […] Its Other, in all of its monstrous disguises, is rarely singular and never stable; rather the gothic Other typically condenses various cultural and national threats. (2)

Based in a new country and a new culture, the American gothic presents villains who pose threats to the home base and the family, destructive forces who operate from within, and threats from the outside world, not only in the form of ghosts or spectres, but also as ordinary people and society.

Toni Morrison discusses the American gothic in *Playing in the Dark*, and the failure of the American Dream is what grabs her attention – "how pronounced in [the literature] is the absence of that term's elusive mixture of hope, realism, materialism, and promise. [...] it is striking how dour, how troubled, how frightened and haunted our early and founding literature truly is" (35). She further argues that European Romance appealed to Americans because of their need for an exploration of anxiety and fears. With a past as dark and violent as America's, what finally became the biggest fear of all was blackness. She states that the slave population became an outlet for the ultimate terror, fear and need – human freedom in the vast American continent. "Nothing highlighted freedom like slavery […] what rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism – a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American" (35). Critics generally agree that slavery is an important part of the American and African American gothic:

> The very life of a slave is also inevitably a gothic existence. The murders/suicides, rapes, entrapment and escape cycles, torture (brutal whippings), and familial secrets (illegitimate births) that make up numerous gothic plots constitute real, daily existence under slavery. (Wester *African-American Gothic* 35)

These discursive elements are especially useful in analyzing Morrison's idea that the slavery of the mind is as important as enslaved bodies in the gothic tradition. Both

Pecola and Bride are stuck in toxic cognitive patterns regarding their own identity and the world they live in. These patterns are inherited from their ancestors and produced by prejudice and the racist philosophy that initially enabled the transatlantic slave trade. In *Playing in the Dark* gothic interpretations are generally applied to *Beloved* and to a much lesser degree to the rest of her body of work or newer African-American literature in general. Looking at my two thesis narratives in light of gothic tropes can give a refreshing look at Morrison's critique of systemic racism and the white gaze.

The "filth" or "funk" that is a part of this thesis title, is in its extended form of darkness and potential threat, arguably the foundation of the otherness of the African American, and it is in part Morrison's explanation for the racially divisive culture of the Unites States: "It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity" (Morrison *The Source of Self-Regard* 44). Freedom as a concept in early American literature grew from the enormous American continent of unknown beauty and terrors and not least from slaves being a measure of human freedom. Slaves became a symbol of the possibilities of not only physical freedom but was also a "surrogate for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and elusiveness. Problems like the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, nature without limits, internal aggression, evil, sin and greed" (Morrison *The Source of Self-Regard* 38). America mirrors the home continent of the enslaved in its enormous size and unknown perceived and real threats: America and Africa alike have qualities that were frightening to Europeans – both were "dark" continents in their own way. The historical experience for many African Americans in the U.S. has been gothic and Morrison uses the gothic as a critique of racist culture and historical truths that get left out of the grand narrative of American exceptionalism.

Morrison's characters are, in many of her novels, often presented as stories of the mutilated body, of ghosts, rape, murder, filth - real or imagined, madness, depravity and sexuality. In *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* Wester claims that "Black Gothic, as a "multipolar reflecting reflection", reveals the archetypal depictions of racial, sexual, and gendered others as constructions, useful in the production of white patriarchal dominance" (2). Morrison has been a master of

portraying perceived otherness in her books. She is not afraid to write about violence, death, ghosts, rape and even murder. Gothic fiction has a fascination with death, the obscene and the exaggerated - and gothic narratives often involve a repressed psyche.

In Chapter 2 I argue that in *God Help the Child* Bride's own body is the repressed – it regresses into a teenager and then into a prepubescent child's body when Bride finally lets herself explore her own past, her guilt - and love. Bride's physical transformation is a trait of magical realism, a more typically South American or Southern gothic form of the gothic narrative.

Madness is common in gothic narratives, especially the madness of women, often combined with the maiden in distress-trope or confinement, not least in the narratives of female writers of nineteenth century gothic: "Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested themselves in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors – such pattern recurred throughout this tradition" (Gilbert&Grubar Preface). In Chapter 2 I show that Pecola can be read as either a maiden in distress or a madwoman in the attic, enslaved and entrapped by the villain who is in focalizer Claudia's eyes Pecola's father Cholly - but in fact is also the larger white-dominated American culture of the 1930s. Cholly captures her spirit and her body and she is damned by his actions and lack of communal support. And Cholly in his turn is damned by racism and the violence and abuse that he experienced in his own childhood.

In Chapter 3 I will analyze how Morrison presents the two supporting characters Sweetness and Soaphead using the gothic trope of the dark past and inherited shame in families. Morrison introduces us to both characters with brutal biographical depth – and through these focalizers she writes long passages around their heritage. The focus on light skin is the first and last thought of these two focalizers - characters that are, in different ways, very important in the narrative and our protagonists' lives. Soaphead is the closest we get to a human villain in *The Bluest Eye* and it is he who finally pushes Pecola's mind to its breaking point. He spends his days reading people's fortunes and is in many ways an outcast and ends up bewitching Pecola into madness. Soaphead's double in *GHTC,* Sweetness, is the daughter of a "passing" family. She in

turn gives birth to a daughter the narrator describes as “Sudan black” daughter and is not able to accept or love her. The inheritance of shame and “otherness” follow the African American characters through generations, as they are always the object of white racism, xenophobia and fear. I discuss violence and violation in Chapter 3.

The strength of Morrison as I see it, lies in her ability to let readers of all backgrounds see that the black body is not the villain or monster of the narrative. She turns the eye of the beholder back on the reader to make us see the perceived Other’s side of the story. “Holding the despising glance while sabotaging it was difficult”, she writes in her foreword to *The Bluest Eye*. I find that Morrison is able to do just that. Her ability to reach readers outside the character’s in group and to hit with the force that she did stems partly from this gothic style that works as a mirror for white people to look at themselves in. In many cases we are represented with the black body as something animalistic, as sexualized beings that are meant to adhere to the ideas and regulations that white people force upon them. Mirroring is a common trait of gothic fiction, as well as doubling.

> Doubling hence illustrates deep anxieties explored in the Gothic regarding the weakening of the distinctions drawn along lines of class, gender, race and nationality, posing threats to the interests of the self. […] Doubling also foregrounds the motif of mirroring, in particular the projection of one’s fears, desires and anxieties onto the other, which becomes an uncomfortable reflection of ugly traits that the self refuses to acknowledge. (Li)

In Chapter 3.3 I will discuss characters in light of the gothic trope of doubling.

1.3. Historical context

I will include historical aspects of slavery and its legacy as it influences the characters in the novel, herein the emergence of skin color as a racist hierarchical feature that was, and sadly still is, used to appraise a person’s worth and place in society. The skin color hierarchy is a remnant from the chattel slavery era. In American gothic literature slavery is as we have seen one of the main reasons American history is so dark and traumatic. Slavery and its racist mindset are still very much present in the United States and racism towards African Americans can be witnessed daily. It is seen in the

streets and more and more often broadcast to the world in ever increasing incidents of police violence. Slavery as an institution has helped shape modern Unites States and we still see the backlashes in today's politics and culture, with white supremacy being on the rise, the 2016 presidential election of what some Europeans and Americans considered a bigot and riots in the streets. The lingering difference in the system's treatment of African Americans and European Americans in the United States finally lead to the 2020 campaign Black Lives Matter (hereafter referred to as BLM) and African Americans are now hoping for a different future. BLM shows us that the past, the slave body and the African as the "Other" is still a cornerstone of the United States and the racist white gaze is still difficult to identify because it is so entrenched in ways of thinking.

Slavery has been a part of society for as long as we have written history to witness is, but slave societies founded on a larger number of slaves, like the United States, are not numerous. Ancient Greece and Rome were societies based on slave labor, but who became slaves was ethnically random. Slaves could be infants abandoned by their parents, and even Aristotle said that some people were natural slaves, but ethnicity seems to be missing in his reasoning: "For he is by nature a slave who is capable of belonging to another […] The intention of nature therefore is to make the bodies also of freemen and of slaves different—the latter strong for necessary service, the former erect and unserviceable for such occupations, but serviceable for a life of citizenship" (Aristotle 1256b). Thus, the idea and institution of slavery has been part of humanity for a long time. Hunter proposes that the color hierarchy is a plot to divide and conquer the enslaved and former slaves:

> Even though traditional forms of colonialism no longer exist, a system of internalized colonialism continues for people of color in the United States; this is particularly true for African Americans […] The creation of skin color as a basis to divide enslaved Africans for work chores and to create distrust and animosity among them, minimizing chances for revolt. This early skin color hierarchy has persisted in the African American community. (Hunter 177)

We will see that this is true in Chapter 2, where black women instead of empowering each other break each other down in their need to comply with white values. In

Chapter 3 I will show how Hunter's view is underscored by the characters of Sweetness in *God Help the Child* and Soaphead in *The Bluest Eye*.

The Arabs were the first to emphasize ethnicity when they chose their slaves, enslaving sub-Saharan Africans who were darker than their Arabian counterparts and a part of the historical, now derogatory, "negroid" ethnic groups. By the time slavery became part of the transatlantic trade, it was already a natural part of the philosophy of the era, see also Battalora (2013) *Birth of a White Nation – The Inventions of White People and Its Relevance Today*. The African slave was a vast resource for the New World Europeans, immeasurable in their contributions to the country:

> From 1500 to 1820 almost 9 million African slaves left for the New World, compared to less than 3 million white. […] However it happened. Slavery became indelibly linked with people of African descent in the Western hemisphere. The dishonor, humiliation, and bestialization that were universally associated with chattel slavery merged with blackness in the New World. (Morgan 53)

In the New World Europeans first used Indians as slave labor, but they were susceptible to diseases and died, thus producing a new need for laborers in great numbers, a need that was filled by the transatlantic slave trade from West-Africa to The Americas.

God Help the Child is set well after the Black is Beautiful campaign of the 1960s, which was Morrison's contemporary time period when she penned her first novel. The movement rose simultaneously as the French 1920s literary criticism movement *negritude* and both looked away from colonialism and viewed black literature and people from a Pan-African point of view. "Négritude" is the self-affirmation of black peoples, or the affirmation of the values of civilization of something defined as "the black world" as an answer to the question "what are we in this white world?" (Diagne). Simultaneously, the Harlem Renaissance had the same function in America and together these formed a transatlantic movement that valued African culture and heritage in a new way.

The concept of Négritude refers to French African students' reaction to the view that their heritage of "being colonial subjects meant that they all belonged to people considered uncivilized, naturally in need of education and guidance from Europe" (Diagne). The African American writer and the Harlem Renaissance wanted to similarly reclaim the African identity from white writers.

> Where American Gothic writers feared the black creature that passed among them in white face, black writers fought the bodily inscriptions and misreadings of/in racial ideology. […] portraitures were meant as "the likenesses of fellow American citizens, and not a beaten, raped, humiliated, and subservient class of servile human being". (Wester *African-American Gothic* 62)

These ideas were revived in the 1960s through Black Pride ideas and organizations, wanting to end the degradation and derogatory view of black people, both intellectually and physically. In the wake of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, Black is Beautiful joined the ranks in the 1960s in the United States, among other countries' black cultural uprisings. Morrison addresses the difference between the Old-World slavery and the New World slavery in *Playing in the Dark*, emphasizing what Aristotle showed us – the American slave was visible:

> The distinguishing features of the not-Americans were their slave status, their social status - and their color. […] These slaves, unlike many others in the world's history, were visible to a fault. And they had inherited, among other things, a long history of the meaning of color. […] That meaning had been named and deployed by scholars from at least the moment, in the eighteenth century, when [one] started to investigate both the natural history and the inalienable rights of man – that is to say, human freedom. (49)

This visibility is a focus in *The Bluest Eye* and we will see how the slave Pecola cannot escape the master's eye, an eye that reinforces the racist notion of beauty. It is important here to be aware of media's speed of transmission into the world not long after slavery was abolished. The expansion of visual media reinforced these racist ideas of beauty and purity.

In addition to movies and subsequent TV, the bourgeoning world of advertisement showed black people as filthy, silly, simple figures that were available for ridicule and mockery and thus easy for ad companies and brands to exploit. This discussion has followed us into today's world, where both African Americans, Native Americans and Sami are fighting to remove stigmatizing and caricatured illustrations from products.

In *The Bluest Eye* filth plays an important role in Morrison's portrayal of inherited shame and the internalization of a negative and animalistic societal view of the black body. This filth or funk is a tactile part of the character's life in *The Bluest Eye*, but also relates to the city they live in and the ghetto-like surroundings, as well as the darkness of their skin. In *God Help the Child* filth is a more intellectual part of the narrative. The memories of Sweetness and the magical realism body transformation of Bride in different ways speak to the acceptance of one's own body and identity.

Rooted in the transatlantic chattel slave trade and the American pre-industrial revolution era, in black communities there is said to have been a tradition for excluding certain groups from churches, organizations, social groups and institutions. The excluded groups are people with dark skin and people with "African facial features" (Kerr 271). These views are a big part of the internalized shame that Sweetness and Soaphead carry around, but it is also visible in the characters of Geraldine and Pauline. In Section 2.2. I will show how in *God Help the Child* the same shame is set in our own time and, although systemic racism has changed

between 1940 and 2015, both the main character's journey and the narrative is built on shame. Both Pecola and Bride need to obtain loved and acceptance in spite of the learned and inherited shame due to the color of their skin, but only one of them has the resources and support to do so. In Chapter 3.1 I show that in both *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*, the skin color hierarchy was an ideologically constructed scale of worth for the families of both Pecola and Bride, a heritage passed on to future generations.

In *The Bluest Eye* we are introduced to "funk" as a concept that black women from the city are trying to avoid – funk is the animalistic part of the human body, the wetness of sex, the curly African hair, sweat and other human excretions. The freedom from funk Morrison bestows these women is directly connected to the undermining of shame in their view of themselves and the world. The reason they are clean and proper like this is that they are trying to be less black, to avoid the "funk." Part of the problem of racism is the Africanism in for instance literature, that sees the slave and African American as more animalistic than white people. This "othering" creates a distance between whites and the unknown terrors of the "dark continent" and its displaced people. Morrison wants the reader to be aware of the structures that this vision of the African American is built on, the "denotative and connotative blackness African people have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that characterize these peoples in Eurocentric eyes" (Morrison *The Source of Self-Regard* 141). She critiques the view of African Americans that has led to lighter-skinned African Americans having higher-status occupations, higher salaries, and more years of education than their darker-skinned brethren, even when parental characteristics and other variables related to adult socioeconomic status are taken into consideration (see also Hill 2002). She critiques it, but her style of writing also wants to let the reader critique it or at least be aware of it through the breaking up of the narrative.

African Americans have been "the Other" since the transatlantic slave industry built America. The African is seen by whites as more closely linked to nature, more a part of the natural world than white people. In her novels, Morrison opposes the white view of African Americans, she is trying to make the readers aware of what drives the "othering" of African Americans in literature and society.

Chapter 2
Beauty standards and gothic tropes

2.1. *The Bluest Eye* – the gaze of systemic racism[1]

This novel deals with themes of racism, gender and the shame caused by society's norms relating to beauty. The text displays both collective and individual shame, the latter in the forms of for example sexuality and social norms. Shame is presented in several forms in Morrison's works, with the critical focus most often turned to learned racial shame in the narrative, interwoven with sexual and gender related shame. The narrative can be analyzed using the dichotomy of filth and purity, where the squalor of the city serves as a typically gothic backdrop for Pecola's story.

Cormier-Hamilton writes that "the white majority culture is both a direct and indirect suppressor, withholding money, power and prestige to turn blacks against blacks, creating an inverted and aberrant community" (118). Nowhere is this clearer than in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*. Both Pecola and Bride live in worlds that revolve around the color of their skin. Their value is directly connected to this both archaic and ever-present hierarchy that stems from the slavery era. "For African Americans there is a direct relationship between economic gain and light skin; a black individual's chances of achieving both social and economic advantages is in direct correlation to his/her ability to correspond more closely to the images of beauty and common ideologies of the dominant society" (Cormier-Hamilton 115). *TBE* is set in a world that would not see emancipation, human rights and feminism for some years to come, but we still see this use of colorism and racism in everyday life now.

In *The Bluest Eye* we meet the prepubescent sisters Claudia and Frieda MacTeer in 1940s America, whose family suddenly have to foster their friend from school, Pecola Breedlove, who is turned out from her house with her family after her father fails to take care of them. Pecola is bullied at school for being ugly and for her dark skin color and prominent African features. Everywhere these young girls turn, they are told

[1] Part of my analysis of *The Bluest Eye* is based on my exam in ENG-3103

that being white is more beautiful, being white makes you happier and being white is the answer to all their problems. From their books in school, via their parents to media and neighbors they are told that they must behave more like the pretty white girls they see in ads and on screen. Thrown into the mix are characters that seemingly inhabit no shame, like three prostitutes that live over Pecola's house, as well as characters who are drowning in shame and who let that shame take over their lives entirely.

The Dick-and-Jane story that introduces every chapter throughout the novel highlights the fake, perfect world displayed by the media and schools and entire system surrounding the three girls in the narrative. The breakdown of the storybook world is reminiscent of the gothic surrealism of crumbling castles that enslave the female domestic characters. It is a ruin of the perceived exaltedness of the castle, i.e. the storybook world. The irony in the beginnings of each chapter is palpable – for example where the rape chapter is initiated by "SEEFATHERHEISBIGANDSTRONGFATHERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJANEFATHERISSMILINGSMILEFATHERSMILESMILE" (Morrison *TBE* 103). The schoolbook story is revealed as not only false, it is also ironic and tragic.

Morrison in hindsight thought that this breaking down of Dick and Jane made her story overexplanatory, but I find it gives a mirroring quality to the narrative that follows these scrambled pieces of Dick and Jane's story. Mirroring is a trope that works to enhance the ominous and otherworldly narrative that gothic literature often embodies. It works on the reader in the same way as Brecht's Verfremdungs-effect – by breaking the illusion of the narrative and reminding the reader that this is a story and thus distances us from our own emotions. Morrison wants to speak to a broad, diverse audience's intellect. The garbled Dick-and-Jane story is also a foreshadowing of events to come, in a naivistic, ironic portrayal of a fake, crumbling world. It is a meaningless collection of words that Morrison undresses and analyzes. By building her narrative inside the white middle class Dick-and-Jane story, she also underlines the systemic racism that American society is based on and she shows us how devastating the lack of support can be for a child, especially.

There is a notable difference between black society's view of a black man and a black woman in Morrison's fiction. Walther states that "the primary difference between the

male and the female gaze in *The Bluest Eye* lies in its connection to sexual desire. Women look at other women to determine social status and to make comparisons to themselves, which is an objectifying act; men look at women as sexual object" (779). And in *TBE*, it is in fact how women view each other that comes across as the most devastating black-on-black-degradation, "women hold other women up to a scale of visual attractiveness" (779.).

One question that arises is why Pecola does not learn any coping skills or gain any resources from her prostitute friends, who live right above her and whom she visits on a regular basis. These black women seem to be in touch with their own bodies, and their humorous and bizarre acceptance of themselves could have rubbed off on Pecola: They are evidently the object of men's desires in some way or another and enjoying it. These women portray a shamelessness that is unique in the narrative and in real world circumstances these women would no doubt raise questions like "have they no shame?" They steal, kill and cheat their customers out of their fortunes and they "hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use" (Morrison *TBE* 60).

One of the prostitutes is nicknamed The Maginot Line – which was a defense system devised by the French in WWII that did nothing to keep out the German forces. Thus, Marie "Maginot" is an easily (sur)mountable woman who is bad at keeping up her defenses towards men. The three prostitutes do not have any respect for other women or men, except women "they would have described as "good Christian colored women"" (Morrison *TBE* 43). Ironically, these good Christian colored women are the ones that Claudia and Frieda tell us are the most demeaning when they talk about the prostitutes. The girls' own mother says that Maginot Line is unfit to eat from her plates. "…the one church women never allowed their eyes to rest on. That was the one who had killed people, set them on fire, poisoned them, cooked them in lye […] I had heard too many black and red words about her, seen so many mouths go triangle at the mention of her name" (Morrison *TBE* 60). The othering of the prostitutes by women in the town boils down to claims of filthy and animalistic features. Again, we are reminded of what Morrison tells us in her foreword about how she wanted to portray what happens to a child who finds no support from her surroundings. The prostitutes take comfort and support in each other, turning their hatred and aggression

towards the source of their oppression, the men and customers. Pecola is teased and cast out not only by white people, but the inherited cloak of ugliness and enforced shame she bears allows her peers to degrade her as well. The shame and hatred in *The Bluest Eye* are served Pecola from all sides – it is the white eye of the beholder, the master's eye, that she thinks makes her ugly, and Pecola does not have the resources to protest as we will see that Claudia does in Chapter 3.4.

We are later introduced to Geraldine, who is one of these colored women who keep their house in meticulous order to avoid the funk and filth of the natural body and the community, but she is presented in a negative way: Geraldine is a representative of the colored women who try to forget that they are black, the ones who try to diminish their blackness and nurture any light-skinned, fair-eyed speck in their DNA. One third through the book Geraldine steps in as the focalizer and shows us the essence of the authors' message. Pauline also almost becomes an all-black Geraldine in her strive to uphold order and cleanliness. We are presented with her striving to move away from her blackness and it is clear that filth, sex, bodily functions and the natural way of the body is part of the "funk" that is so prohibited in the household of the Geraldines of the world.

> […]they learn[…] how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. (Morrison *TBE* 64)

Geraldine feels that anything that connects her to her blackness is shameful and the sanctity of her home, her gothic castle, is being threatened by the Other, the visiting Pecola. She sees in Pecola what she fears the most and what she has fought to gain a distance from all her life. The little girl, Geraldine's villain, stands before her in a dirty dress, ugly shoes, African hair. She sees a filthy little girl "[these little girls] they were everywhere […] like flies they hovered; like flies they settled. And this one had settled in her house. […] "Get out", she said, her voice quiet. "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house"" (Morrison *TBE* 72). The imagery is very particular, the filth trope presented by the dirtiest of the dirty - flies. Geraldine is the main locomotive in Morrison's narrative of filth and purity, she is the embodiment of the

women who have learned to behave and get rid of the funkiness. In creating this character Morrison animates some of the most important concepts of her narrative – self-hatred and denial. Whereas Geraldine has risen above the filth of little black girls, Pecola's mother Pauline has given up trying to maintain a "white" lifestyle and lives in squalor and poverty with her family.

Pauline's childhood sense of self is heavily influenced by an accident that left her body changed when she was young - "her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot" (Morrison *TBE* 86). Her foot was once punctured by a rusty nail and causes her to drag it along the floorboards the rest of her life, making her unable to hide a limp when she wears high heels. Her disfigurement is a typical feature of gothic narratives. The trope of "otherness" is also a strong element in gothic literature, where we often see out-groups and in-groups or a character that is viewed as an outsider. Although Pauline is not a caricatured humpback, she is heavily influenced by her foot in her adolescence and later in life. Her disfigurement is also indirectly part of the reason why Cholly rapes their daughter.

Pauline is trapped in a Female gothic – "where the domestic space becomes a nightmarish terrain" (Wester *African-American Gothic* 381). The disappointment and settling of this domestic life are described at the beginning of the Breedlove-chapter in *The Bluest Eye*. Her own home is ruined, but both before and after Cholly turns out his family, Pauline continues to build her white employers' home. "Quiet as it's kept" is the opening words of the novel, and secrecy within the house's walls is important in gothic novels.

> The home became a means of exploring and uncovering social transgressions in [early] Gothic literature because of its apparent domesticity, respectability, association with family history and its role as being the most intimate shelter of privacy. Here, Freud's principle of the uncanny, derived from the word unheimlich, which interestingly means un-homely, provides a useful context. Unheimlich gains its meaning from its apparent opposite, heimlich, which means homely but it also means something that is concealed, secret and made

> obscure. Therefore, the uncanny means something that ought to have remained secret has now come to light". (Li)

Morrison addresses the gothic trope of secrets of in both her narrative and her afterword. "Quiet as its kept" illustrates the whisperings of families and neighbors, the shameful facts that are better kept under wraps. The secrets between women are important as inherited shame in *TBE*, and both housewives, prostitutes and little girls share whispers of shame amongst themselves. I go into details on secrets of the past in Chapter 3.

The young Pauline has adolescent dreams of being rescued by a stranger, a romantic knight in shining armor who can enrapture her, take care of her and "lay her head on his chest and […] lead her away to the sea, to the city, to the woods…forever" (Morrison *TBE* 88). She is happy in the beginning with Cholly, who eventually turns out to be far from a knight in shining armor. Pregnant with her first child, Sammy, Pauline goes to the cinema where she is introduced to both white beauty and romantic love as guidelines for success. "Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit […] seeking to imprison the beloved" (95). Love is both a source of freedom in *God Help the Child* and a source of enslavement in *The Bluest Eye*.

Pauline dreams of the clothes, the houses, the romantic love and the luxurious bathrooms that society includes in the cinema silver screen's image of white luxury and beauty. Pauline subsequently lets this vision guide her outlook on life and self. On the screen "the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their crutches" (Morrison *TBE* 95) in an almost biblical fashion. The icon worshipping media is even more destructive for Pauline, whose disfigurement is one more reason that she will never be able to live up to the white beauty standards she sees on screen. The escape she sees on screen is not available to her and her rescue falls short as Cholly is not a knight, he is in her eyes a villain who entraps her in her home.

> The suffering heroine is similarly indispensable to the genre, […] a figuration of shifting anxieties around nation, gender, and domesticity. […] The threat of violence against women proves central to the gothic genre because of the female form's "function as a crucial but contested site in discourses of identity, chief among them the discourse of nation. In the context of the gothic's characteristic oppositions, victimized womanhood embodies a nationalist narrative in miniature". (Wester "Toni Morrison's Gothic" 7)

Pauline longs for whiteness also when she is well into her adult life. Her meticulous sense of order and wish for something better is nurtured as she takes a position as a servant in the white Fisher family's household – where she is met with what she thinks is a sense of reverence and acceptance. Here she witnesses the wealth and resources she herself has never been able to obtain. Although she has long stopped trying to look like Jean Harlow, she favors her white employer's daughter over her own. This neglectful choice is explained by Putnam thusly: "Racially exploited, sexually violated, and often emotionally humiliated for years or decades, certain [of Morrison's] black female characters make violent choices that are not always easily understandable" (25).

In one of the most devastating of all the scenes in the novel, Pecola is directly trumped by the little white girl in the Fisher household, in an act of said mothering violence. This important scene shows the dysfunctional relationship between Pecola and her mother. The apparent lack of motherly love and loyalty and the twisted order of priorities are made clear, not only to the reader, but, more painfully, to the little black girl. Pecola accidentally knocks over a berry cobbler in the Fisher's kitchen and burns her legs on the hot berry juice: "In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her on the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication" (Morrison *TBE* 85). Pauline hits her own daughter and proceeds to comfort the Fisher's daughter. "The little pink girl started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more, Polly will change it" (85). One might think that a mother would have taken care to see that her

own daughter had not been burned first, and then later concentrated on taking care of the little blonde girl. Morrison tells us in her foreword that she intentionally created non-supportive parents for Pecola, and at the same time she shows us how Pauline has internalized the white racist view of her family's value and she uses all her resources to help her white employers maintain their clean and pure wealthy lifestyle. In both the novels I mention in this thesis a mother who kills or wants to kill her child. The mothers are trapped in a twisted domesticity where instead of cherishing their child, they distance themselves from it. To rid themselves of the shame that comes from having a "Sudan black" child, they almost commit pedicide. Pauline creates a fake life in her employer's household, much like Bride in *God Help the Child* creates a fake identity to distance herself from her past.

Kuenz reminds us of the framing Morrison has set her novel in: "Like the Dick-and-Jane story, Pauline's movies continuously present her with a life, again presumably ideal, which she does not now have and which she has little, if any, chance of ever enjoying in any capacity other than that of the ideal servant" (Kuenz 103). Her role as servant in a rich white household gives her pride and purpose but furthers her role of the subjugated in white society. She will go far to erase the parts of herself and her family that do not play to society's white ideal. Pauline's love for and presence in the Breedlove household diminishes as a result of her servitude at the Fisher's. "Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. […] more and more she neglected her house, her children, her man – they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep" (Morrison *TBE* 99). In the Fisher household she finds "beauty, order, cleanliness and praise […] power […] and luxury were hers" (99). "Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children" (100). Pauline is losing herself and her family to the fantasy world of the white middle class, at the same time as Pecola is losing her mind and becomes a part of the fantasy in her own mind. They worship this world at the expense of their family and sanity.

Pauline's betrayal of Pecola in the cobbler scene shows that her innocence is lost – she has sold herself and the wellbeing of her own family to try to be a part of the silver screen world she sees at the cinema and has internalized racist ideas about blackness. We see again how the "Other" and the filth of outside threaten the home:

As her black world creeps into this "holy" space by Pecola's infiltration in the cobble scene and subsequent disarray and filthiness, Pauline makes a choice on which world to focus her love on - her own or the Fisher's world. Never is this distance clearer than when Claudia and Frieda find Pecola on the stairs of the Fisher residence. The imagery is salient – Pecola lingers on the outside of the Dick-and-Jane world, while her mother is inside, tending to that world's needs. The same thing is present in *God Help the Child*, where Bride's grandmother is in a similar situation: "My mother was a housekeeper for a rich white couple. They ate every meal she cooked and insisted she scrub their backs while they sat in the tub and God knows what other intimate things they made her do" (Morrison *GHTC* 4). Every step of the way Pauline experiences the distance from white people, she is constantly reminded of her place in the racist hierarchy of color and she accepts it to maintain order in her life.

Filth, in both a direct and literal sense, is a source of shame that is repeated throughout the novel, like we saw when Mrs. MacTeer described the prostitutes. Although stains are by Claudia seen as a good thing, filth and dirt are recurring motifs and also a source of shame for Pauline. As she and "the girls from Aiken" remove themselves from dirt, they also remove themselves from their own sexuality and bodies. The naturality of the sexual drive in women has become shameful to these women and they contrast Pecola's prostitute acquaintances upstairs.

As Pauline's adventures in front of the silver screen repeat themselves, her feeling of not being good enough grows – her disappointment in the world and her life starts to chip away on her self-esteem and lays the groundwork for the fear she instills in her children, a fear that underlines the feeling of shame in them: "Fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's mother's. Into her son she beats a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beats a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (Morrison *TBE* 100). She punishes her children for their blackness and lets her feelings of shame and disappointment ruin her own family.

Breeding these kinds of thoughts in the children's minds strongly contributes to the feeling of shame that Pecola harbors inside herself – the shame of not being beautiful

and of not having blue eyes. In presenting the family, Morrison explains the feeling of shame and ugliness that enshrouds the household:

> The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporarily difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. […] No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness […] was behavior, the rest of the family […] wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. (Morrison *TBE* 28)

This ugliness is something that exists inside the minds and feelings of self in the whole storefront family, an ugliness that stems from the same source that Pauline's wish to be a part of the silver screen world comes from. It has been forced on them by a racist society that sees white beauty as a grand virtue, as purity and as success.

> You looked at [the Breedloves] and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. […] The master had said, "You are ugly people". They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance". (Morrison *TBE* 28)

We see Morrison draw a line straight back to the era of slavery. Time has passed since the "master" yielded his whip over the slaves, but the racist attitude towards black people is still a problem in the United States. In Chapter 3.1. I discuss this inheritance of shame and incorporation of internalized shame as a normalized part of the main characters' thoughts and actions.

The Breedloves' view of themselves contrasts with how Claudia feels about these same norms that designate shame towards some people and some not: "And all the time we knew that [high yellow] Maureen Peal was not the enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us" (Morrison *TBE* 58). The "thing" here is the underlying false and racist notion in

American culture that black people are uglier and less worth than white people. Morrison portrays the learning of shame when Pauline is influenced by Hollywood cinema and Pecola and her brother Sammy inherits this shame from their mother and father. Pauline has a limp foot and Cholly was raped and abused in his early teens – they have both internalized the shame from their traumas. Claudia's insight is very mature for her age and through her as a focalizer Morrison forces the reader to not only see the racism in the story, but also reflect over it. The "thing," the gothic monster, the ghost and the villain in Morrison's story are all systemic racism.

The everyday shaming of racism is thrust into the face of Pecola in Jacobowski's store. The white storeowner does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see: "The total absence of human recognition - the glazed separateness [...] this vacuum is not new to her. Somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness (Morrison *TBE* 37).

The eleven-year-old Pecola senses the storeowner's distaste for her. She grasps that he does not even want to touch her hand because it is black. But she does not understand why she should feel shame. Her shame is to her inexplicable, Morrison writes. "Anger is better; there is a sense of being in anger, a reality and a presence" (Morrison *TBE* 37). But Pecola is not able to be angry at the forces around her that keep on pounding at her self-esteem and make her "fold into herself, like a pleated wing" (57). Woodward reads Pecola's swallowing of the blue-eyed candy Mary Janes as her swallowing her shame – thus "internalizing the values of white America" (Woodward 223). This may also be viewed on a more individual level; the little black girl is in some impossible way trying to incorporate this tiny blue-eyed persona into her own self. "To resist the shame she feels, a crimeless guilt, she eats the candy to acquire Mary Jane's eyes, to *be* Mary Jane" (Otten 11).

It may seem tempting to jump to the conclusion that in Pecola's wish for blue eyes lies only a superficial longing to be and look white. Pecola longs to see herself in a storybook world, the Dick-and-Jane children's book narrative that pops up as a reminder of the Soria Moria castle that Pauline yearns for and Geraldine fights against all natural inclinations to be a part of:

> It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes […] were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. […] If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola, we mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes' […] *Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes.* (Morrison *TBE* 34)

This is the first time Pecola expresses her wish for blue eyes in the novel, and her thoughts about facial features seem to underline the idea that the wish is part of a desire to look white. But what Pecola hopes to achieve by acquiring blue eyes, is specifically to not have to *see* what she sees now, she wants a vision of the world that complies more with the Dick-and-Jane version of America. She wants to be an equal in the white eyes of society. We see that blue eyes are not a random white trait she picks out of a heap of many. According to her twisted naïveté, the world around her will turn into a happier place if she gets her blue eyes. Pecola senses that when little white girls are present, people make an effort not to expose them to anything that might corrupt their innocence.

In Pecola's mind little white girls are protected from the evils of the world because they are white - for them the world is a better place, and Pecola wants the world to be different. Morrison set out to criticize the gaze of a society that is twisted in their view that black people are ugly, and this is the way she solves it. The gaze of the world is mirrored in Pecola.

The foundation for Pecola's demise lies in society's norms regarding beauty and hence, as we have seen, also in the culture of the Breedlove family. Pecola's development can also be viewed in the light of the gothic trope of madness[2]. The madwoman is a character who is often locked away in an attic of a castle due to her not fitting in to society, often because of a deformity or other sort of physical flaw. The flaw is in this case partly imaginary and partly conceptual, but Pecola still ends up behind bars in her own mind. She is forever trapped in the utopia of blue eyes and the acceptance from the white gaze.

In her afterword Morrison writes about her reaction to the little girl who was her "real life Pecola". Already when they had just started elementary school this little girl said she wanted blue eyes:

> I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I "got mad" at her instead. (Morrison *TBE* 167)

This emotion Morrison transfers to Claudia as the three girls are faced with the hatred streaming towards them from first the boys at school and then from the "high-yellow" Maureen Peal: "Safe on the other side, [Maureen] screamed at us, "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I *am* cute!" […] Pecola stood a little apart from us, her eyes hinged in the direction in which Maureen had fled. She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me, she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes" (Morrison *TBE* 57). Claudia is furious at Pecola, the girl with no affinity for rage and no one to protect her.

[2] See also Gilbert and Gubar (2020)

This scene underlines Pecola's lack of anger and her lack of that self-preservation instinct and social resources which makes Claudia rip heads off the blond, blue-eyed doll she gets for Christmas. The difference between Cholly, Pauline and Pecola is that Pecola’s anger is turned inward; her sense of self deteriorates every time she experiences shame because she does not take it out on her surrounding but lets it corrupt her, and this makes her the perfect victim: “All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us-all who knew her-felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness” (Morrison *TBE* 162). Through a gothic interpretation Pecola is here a symbol of the white view of the Black community, “the Other”, and mirrors how white people have treated both Africans and African Americans since the beginning of modern colonialism.

In viewing “the Other” as weaker and less than themselves, white people can silence the feeling of unrest and terror of the unknown: “Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our own nightmares” (163).

It is in the segment with Cholly’s Aunt Jimmy that the alternative notion of beauty is most clear in *TBE.* Through the omniscient narrator in this part, black women are portrayed as something bigger than the value of their looks as measured by white standards, namely the value of their work and presence in the family and community:

> They ran the houses of white people and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. […] The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical chords; the hands that wrung the necks on chickens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets into bloom;the arms that loaded sheaves, bales, and sacks rocked babies to sleep. (Morrison *TBE* 108)

This scene is mirrored in Claudia's mother's hands that takes care of her in the night, and it also leans into one of Morrison's greatest monologues, the one given by Baby Suggs in her seminal novel *Beloved* (1987), which I discuss in Chapter 3.

2.2. *God Help the Child* – reconstructing the child

God Help the Child is stylistically a more conventional narrative than *The Bluest Eye.* Both the setting in urban 2010s and the more coherent narrative style makes for a reading experience closer to home for most readers. Experiencing it for the first time makes the seasoned Morrison reader think of *The Bluest Eye*. The two novels mirror each other in several ways. Bride mirrors Pecola, Cholly mirrors Booker and Sweetness mirrors Soaphead. It is hard to read one without thinking of the other.

In *God Help the Child* the protagonist is a successful young entrepreneur in the 2010s beauty industry, a "Sudan black" woman who calls herself Bride. Early on we are introduced to her mother's sense of shame regarding her daughter's skin color – a color that comes as a great surprise and shock to her parents. Bride's dark skin causes a great divide between her parents and we are led by Sweetness to believe that this was the sole reason why her father leaves them to fend for themselves on welfare checks. If this is in fact the case or if Sweetness is blaming her daughter's skin color for him leaving them, is a discussion for a different thesis.

Bride's grandmother could pass for white but chose not to because she fell in love with a man of a darker complexion: "She told me she paid the price for that decision. When she and my father went to the courthouse to get married there were two Bibles and they had to put their hands on the one reserved for Negroes. The other one was for white people's hands. The Bible! Can you beat it?" (Morrison *GHTC* 3). Sweetness is so obsessed with Bride's dark skin color that she drags both Bride and consequently an innocent young teacher down with her.

In her childhood Bride commits perjury and lies in a pedophilia trial where one of her teachers is facing years in prison for a crime which she did not commit. In order to gain respect and positive attention from her hateful mother she lies about witnessing sexual abuse. Later in life she wants to say that she is sorry and plans to visit Sofia as

she has been released from prison. 6-year-old Bride witnesses another adult molesting the boy next door, but her mother prohibits her from telling anyone as the perpetrator is their landlord and he would toss them out if they ratted on him. As Bride meets the love of her life in Booker, her new kindness to Sophia whom she, unbeknownst to Booker, helped put behind bars, makes him leave her. We later learn that Booker's brother Adam was raped and killed by a pedophile when they were children and he cannot forgive Bride's betrayal in caring for a woman he thinks is a convicted pedophile. As her need for truth and Booker's love deepens, Bride starts a journey across the country, from the bustling streets of New York City to rural California to find Booker's roots and continue her life beneath the surface that she has been living on for 15 years.

In *The Origin of Others* Toni Morrison comments on her own attempts to write books where she does not condemn the black person to a fate of being a mere sexualized, violent, naturalized being. She describes a "color fetish" where the black person is stigmatized to fit into this frame because of the color of his or her skin. When discussing *The Bluest Eye* she says that

> the consequences of the color fetish are the theme: it's severely destructive force. […] In *God Help the Child*, color is both a curse and a blessing, a hammer and a golden ring. Although neither, the hammer nor the ring, helped make the character a sympathetic human being. Only caring unselfishly for somebody else would accomplish true maturity. (51)

As seen earlier Morrison uses techniques reminiscent of Brecht at the beginning of the chapters in *The Bluest Eye*. She breaks the narrative down into more and more garbled and deconstructed sequences from the storybook world of Dick and Jane. In *God Help the Child* Morrison also presents the chapters through different focalizers and narrators - we get a clear vision of each character's view of the central plot lines, like the trial, the breakup and last but not least Sweetness' explanation for her neglect and hatred towards her daughter.

The novel is a complex story of guilt, lies, violence, racism, abuse and the secrets of the past. Pecola is unlike Bride a tragic character who meets a sad demise indirectly at

the hands of her father. Bride is on the other hand a more positive character. *God Help the Child* ends on a more potentially positive note, where *The Bluest Eye*'s ending is tragic. Pecola's baby dies in her womb and the flowers that Claudia and Frieda plant for their friend and her future do not grow, they wither and die. Bride's pregnancy seems unproblematic and the seed in her is planted there with love. True love is a concept that attracts Bride on several occasions in the novel, much like external beauty is mesmerizing to Pecola and her mother in *The Bluest Eye*. Whereas the white beauty standards are not accessible for Bride or Pecola, love is. For Bride this is one of the reasons her body recedes back to her childhood, it becomes a girl again partly to open up to the possibility of letting the girl in her be loved. Bride's body is further broken down as Sofia lets 15 years of terror loose on Bride's face, an episode of violence that has a purifying power on Sofia and a redeeming power on Bride's guilt. As a contrast to this we learn that Booker's brother was killed by a pedophile serial killer when Booker was a child. Despite all the horrors they go through, Booker and Bride have coping strategies that Cholly and Pecola did not. Part of this may stem from that the setting of *The Bluest Eye* is 1940s Midwest and *God Help the Child* is set in 2010s urban California. Women's and African American emancipation have made the world a somewhat easier place for Bride and Booker compared to that of Pecola and Cholly.

Bride lives in a world where the outside and the surface is the only asset of value. She has built her existence on false premises, with no real connection to her past or real friendships. When she has to step out of her constructed businesswoman bubble, she is faced with the real world in a series of tactile, gothic, violent episodes involving accidents, assault, the forest, a fire and abused children. Booker, who is a no-nonsense focalizer, calls Bride out on these superficial tendencies and sees her distancing herself from her past and from the real world. Inspired by his ongoing relationship with Bride, he sends his aunt Queen Olive letters of poetic impact: "Hey girl what's inside your curly head besides dark rooms with dark men dancing too close for comfort the mouth hungry for more" (Morrison *GHTC* 135). The letters give an analysis of Bride's life as he sees it – the easy, undemanding Bride that he grew so comfortable with. But he does get a few glimpses of the real Bride:

> Once in a while she dropped the hip, thrillingly successful corporate woman facade of complete control and confessed some flaw or painful memory of childhood. […] Bride's complicated relationship with her mother and repellent father meant that, like him, she was free of family ties -it was just the two of them, and with the exception of her obnoxious pseudo-friend Brooklyn there were fewer and fewer interruptions from her colleagues. (134)

This underlines the interpretation that Bride's transformation and identity rebuilding begins with her love for Booker and continues as she connects with and processes her guilt and fake identity.

On the front page of my Vintage edition of *God Help the Child*, there are some words written in the bottom corner: "The past has a hold like no other", which is an important focus in the novel. The importance of the past is seen in Bride's guilt over Sofia's incarceration, her lack of love from Sweeetness, Booker's loss of his brother in adolescence and in a broader sense Booker's philosophical view of his studies and the structural disease that enables the racism many African Americans are met with today. Booker initially signs up for courses in African American studies, but he soon realizes that the insight he is looking for is found in another field: "He'd taken multiple courses in African American studies, where the professors were brilliant at descriptions but could not answer to his satisfaction any question beginning with "why"" (Morrison *GHTC* 110). I discuss this further in Chapter 3.4.

Bride tries for a long time to get a job in fashion. Not until she gets advice from her friend and designer Jeri does she succeed. To enhance her dramatic skin tone he wants her to wear only white all the time. Through Jeri Morrison makes a point of black skin never being neutral or ordinary: "Black sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilized world. White girls, even brown girls have to strip naked to get that kind of attention" (Morrison *GHTC* 36). Even though she immediately meets more success both in her job life and with men, she is always black first. Until she meets Booker, whom she falls in love with and who wants her for more than her skin. When Bride tells him about her plan to visit Sofia, as far as he knows a convicted pedophile, and bring her presents he walks out on her claiming that she is not the woman he wants.

The transformation of Bride's body starts as Booker leaves her and comes full circle as Bride comes face to face with Rain, a child who actually HAS been molested and taken in by a middle aged couple. Bride lives with them after she is in a car accident busting her car and leg up, searching for Booker and his past.
The magical realism in the book is strengthened during these pages as Bride's blackness seems not to matter one way or the other to these educated rural people. As Bride speaks to the young girl Rain, it is getting more and more clear that her body is transforming to rebuild itself, to shake off her betrayal and deceit from her childhood when she sold her soul to win the admiration, acceptance and love of her mother, while at the same time not rescuing a young boy who was indeed attacked, by someone other than Sofia. The young boy is raped by their landlord, and six-year-old Bride witnesses the deed from her window. Sweetness prevented Bride from saying anything about this because Bride was spotted by the perpetrator in the aftermath of the act.

There is a hopeful rebuilding of Bride as the main character, because she opens up to other people. Morrison does not portray her in a very favorable light the first half of the book, we see her as a superficial, vain and self-absorbed woman. These layers are stripped down as her body returns to the shape of a prepubescent girl: ”she felt a companionship [with Rain] that was surprisingly free of envy. Like the closeness of schoolgirls” (Morrison *GHTC* 103). Indeed, Sofia is with her spiritually on this journey, after she beats Bride senseless she recalls her actions and senses that having such a violent outburst has helped her back from her prison - and jail. Sofia has a similar childhood to Bride's – a violent and emotionally unavailable mother who like Sweetness believed in a strict upbringing. "As soon as I threw her out […] I cried […] that black girl did me a favor. […] the release of tears unshed for fifteen years" (Morrison *GHTC* 70). "In my mind I am putting the black girl back together, healing her, thanking her. For the release" (Morrison *GHTC* 77). Here Sofia speaks directly to what happens to Bride's body. The guilt of her courtroom lie in her childhood disappears little by little as her body takes her back to childhood and childlike innocence. Through Bride's contact with the abused girl Rain, Bride's inner child is rebuilt.

2.2.1. Bride’s body – the repressed psyche personified

Bride’s body goes through several forms of transformation in the course of the narrative. First, when Booker tells her that she is not the woman he wants when she tells him she is going to visit what to him is only a convicted pedophile, her body begins a journey back to childhood. And as the narrative unfolds Bride’s body is broken down further. When Bride naively visits Sofia to give her a gift basket of beauty products, she is severely beaten to a pulp by the recently released giantess of a woman, understandably furious after 15 years in prison with plenty of built up anger and frustration. Later, Bride is in a car accident, destroying her expensive car and breaking her leg. In the woods she protects the little girl Rain when local hooligans turn a bird shooting weapon on them. Her maternal instincts are awakening as her body is regressing further. And last, but not least, Bride’s body is all the while producing a new life. I read Bride’s body as a symbol of her coming to terms with her past, her present and her future, forgiving herself for her faults and facing up to the ghosts of her childhood.

The father of psychoanalysis, Freud, coined the term repressed psyche, which is

> the exclusion of distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings from the conscious mind. Often involving sexual or aggressive urges or painful childhood memories, these unwanted mental contents are pushed into the unconscious mind. Repression is thought to give rise to anxiety and to neurotic symptoms, which begin when a forbidden drive or impulse threatens to enter the conscious mind. (Encyclopaedia Britannica “Repression”)

In gothic literature the repressed psyche is a common trope, not only as a Doppelganger like the famous Mr. Hyde to Dr. Jekyll, but also in the form of a character like Bride fighting her nature and trying to distance herself from her childhood racist traumas and personal mistakes. This relates to Chapter 2.1. and Freud’s *unheimlich*; “Uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud Museum “The Uncanny”). Bride’s transformation is a resolution of the uncanny – she is coming to terms with her past.

The magical realism of her initial change from woman to child is a genre of its own, but also a usual element of the Southern gothic, on the margins of which Morrison is often placed: “In Morrison’s texts the magic of living is repeatedly disrupted by social horrors that hurl the texts towards the gothic” (Wester “Toni Morrison’s Gothic” 380). Magical realism incorporates supernatural elements into an otherwise wholly realistic setting. Morrison employs it in for instance *Beloved*, where she creates a haunted house and a ghost, but also in her novel *Song of Solomon*, where human flight is a symbolic, but at the same time a realistic part of the narrative.

Bride herself understands what is happening first when she has stayed in the woods for several weeks, with people who want nothing from her, who do not need the things she has always thought she needed and who truly love each other. “What did she know anyway about good for its own sake, or love without things?” (Morrison *GHTC* 92.) Finally having paused her life in Los Angeles, she realizes what is good in her own life:

> She understood that the body changes began not simply after he left, but because he left [...] Now [her breasts] were gone, like a botched mastectomy that left nipples intact. Nothing hurt; her organs worked as usual except for a strange delayed menstrual period. So what kind of illness was she suffering? One that was both visible and invisible. Him, she thought. His curse. (94)

In Southern gothic magical realism is often seen in the use of religious elements, where good and evil manifest themselves as vampires and ghosts and in the case of *Song of Solomon*, African mythology. In *God Help the Child* Morrison uses magical realism and body horror to illustrate how the identity that Bride has constructed, the intense focus on the external, the commodifying of her beauty and blackness, is falling apart. The main quest of the novel is Bride coming to terms with the guilt and trauma she has felt all her life. Both of which are not her fault but forced on her by her mother and an unaccepting society. Although she has been able to build a successful life in spite of a neglected childhood, racist harassment and her perjury, the life is built on false premises. Her feelings for Booker and his anger at her actions start this journey towards self-fulfillment for Bride and shows the ways racism harms relationships. The second stage of her body change is through violence, when the past

in the form of Sofia rises up and clobbers her to the ground, destroying her face and rejecting her superficial gifts. She is continually breaking down physically and it is when she is healing from these damages that Bride's career and business lessens in importance to her. The violence is a release for both Sofia and Bride, and it brings Bride's past into her future, healing along the way.

In psychology racism and systemic violence towards African Americans is a common contributor to African Americans' trauma. Black people have to "recover from traumatic wounds inflicted by white racism, they need to develop a sense of security and comfort with their blackness. A positive ethnic identity includes a critical consciousness of European American oppression, an awareness of white racism, and use of Afro-centric values and practices to repel its negative effects" (Danzer 18). The link between Bride's body as the repressed psyche and the African American psyche is even clearer when considering black identity from this psychological standpoint.

Chapter 3
Shame, violence and the black body – narrative resistance

3.1. Inheritance of shame

In the gothic tradition the past and the family are well-known tropes. The American gothic builds on and portrays current social issues to a larger degree than its European counterpart. According to Goddu (2014) the whole of the American gothic is based on slave trade, and she argues that this to a certain extent also pertains to the European gothic that coincided with the start of the transatlantic trade with slaves from West-Africa. Due to the horrors of slavery in the United States and the tropes of slavery and confinement found in some European gothic tales, the idea of freedom and hence "the Other" grew central to the American gothic. In this chapter I will look at inherited shame as well as violence and the narrative resistance to shame in Morrison's novels through characters.

Heinert shows how the dominant culture and its inherent racism interrupts the natural development of both Pecola, Geraldine and Soaphead Church: "The characters internalize these narratives in the form of self-hatred and pass them on to the younger generation. […] Pecola's story ends in madness and tragedy, while Claudia concludes that the only viable solution for her is to reject convention" (Heinert 9). It is through her characters that Morrison creates much of her narrative resistance to shame and the inherently racist American society.

In Morrison's Nobel prize winning novel *Beloved*, we meet the matriarchal character Baby Suggs. She is the mother in law of *Beloved*'s protagonist, the escaped slave Sethe. One scene in particular is speaking to the inherited shame theme of *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*: Several African Americans gather around Suggs as she calls out to them in an opening in the forest. Her role in the black community is close to that of a holy woman, and she is a sort of matriarch for other escaped slaves. Her speech is a lesson not learnt by the characters in *The Bluest Eye*, delivered by Morrison's memorable matriarch. The contrast to Geraldine's and Pauline's destructive ideas of themselves is striking.

> ”Here”, she said, ”in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps; laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat hem together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, *you*! […] More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize”. (Morrison *Beloved* 104)

This is a proclamation that resounds throughout Morrison’s works, it is a call for Black people to be aware of their own dignity and have the strength to show it also in the face of racism and racist violence. 16 years earlier, in her article “What the Black Woman Think About Women’s Lib” (1971), Morrison “maintain[s] that black women are already O.K. O.K. with our short necks. O.K. with our calloused hands. O.K. with our tired feet and paper bags… O.K. O.K. O.K.” (Walther 776). Morrison’s first encounter with the destructive force of white society’s standards of beauty was what drove her to write her first novel (Morrison *TBE* Foreword), but she continues to attack or put the spotlight on these standards in several of her books.

In her novel *A Mercy* (2008), the protagonist, a young black slave girl wears fancy high-heeled shoes that make the skin on her feet keep their original softness. This softness is seen by her fellow, female slaves as unnatural and undesired. Walther also comments on this tendency: “To be beautiful you must have soft hands and dainty feet. Morrison’s later work insists on a beauty who is useful, a beauty who works” (776). This notion parallels the housewife hands of Claudia’s mother in *TBE,* they provide the only explicit love in the whole of Claudia’s narrative.

My chosen novels are not the only ones of Morrison’s to address issues of shame, beauty, sexuality and dirt; both in *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987) these are considered main themes and symbols. Baby Suggs’ famous speech in *Beloved* contains the essence of what Pecola and her family lacks; self-love. Morrison creates characters who oppose the shame inflicted by a racist society in her narratives. In *The*

Bluest Eye Claudia provides strong narrative resistance, in *God Help the Child* we have Queen with all her children and husbands as well as Booker - and they all point back or forward to the monologue of Baby Suggs.

In *The Bluest Eye* there is no such unifying character as Baby Suggs, no matriarchal locomotive fighting for a positive black identity or self-love in the face of aggressive shaming. No one is teaching Pecola that it is OK to be Black, that her black body is something to be thankful for. Pecola's double Bride is benefiting from her skin color, she is doing so in an environment that is commodifying her. This commodification of her body mirrors the slave era. Like the slaves of the slave markets, Bride is someone exotic, her color is an aspect of her that her surroundings will not be neutral to. She is still "the Other". Baby Suggs represents a positive possibility for the characters in Beloved to rise above the shame that society has forced upon the black community and that is still thriving 150 years after the setting of *Beloved*. Bride is influenced by society to see her body as a coveted commodity, but always with the words of her mother as a ringing reminder of the racist shame that follows her skin and heritage. "Shame arises from an incommensurability between my own experience and myself as reflected back to me in the eyes of an other" (Bewes 41). If Pecola had the eyes of Baby Suggs instead of the white gaze to reflect herself in, the story might have been different.

In the movie, based on a novel, that Pecola is named after, *Imitation of Life* (1934), the idea of *passing* as white is a major theme, but in Pecola's life it is in a reverse order – the mixed-race daughter rejects and alienates her black mother, to the serious detriment of the latter's health. Much like the movie's Caucasian looking daughter, both Soaphead Church, Sweetness and her grandmother and Geraldine reject their black heritage and blood. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison paints a very clear picture of not only the disgust these colored people feel towards their skin tone, but also of the way they negate their own culture as they try to assimilate into and adopt a white way of life and not least try to avoid the blackness of their bodies. This can only be done by avoiding their bodies altogether, especially the sexual nature of them. "Wherever this erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away, where it crusts, they dissolve it, wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies" (Morrison *TBE* 64). Morrison shows the physical renouncement with tactile naturalized similes. It is

dripping, clinging, crusting and erupting. Morrison presents these women (and men in Soaphead) like people with no sense of an animalistic body left. “They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick”, “she will give him her body sparingly and partially”, “she hopes he will not sweat” (Morrison *TBE* 65). Soaphead “abhorred flesh on flesh. Body odor, breath odor, overwhelmed him. The sight of dried matter in the corner of the eye, decayed or missing teeth, ear wax, blackheads, moles, blisters, skin crusts – all the natural excretions and protections the body was capable of – disquieted him” (132). His ancestors wanted to separate themselves in body, mind and spirit from all that suggested Africa; to cultivate the habits, tastes and preferences that the white family strain would have approved of.

The idea of Black is Beautiful is mirrored in *God Bless the Child*. The novel is set in contemporary America, in New York City. Bride is seen by her mother as “Sudan black,” but revered by her peer group of urban artsy fashionistas. The term African dandyism grew out of the tendency of the Black is Beautiful era to dress the black body in luxurious and expensive fabrics that they were banned from using during the slave era. Bride’s style takes this trend to the next level – her blackness is emphasized by her wearing only white clothes. *God Help the Child* bases much of its story on Bride’s body – none of the main story lines would have happened if Bride’s blackness wasn’t so black, if her initial need for love in spite of her perceived ugliness wasn’t so strong.

Bride is the daughter of two high yellow parents but is born with jet black skin. Her father leaves the family when Bride is but a toddler and her mother continuously mistreats Bride due to her skin color. In spite of this she grows up to become a successful woman, building a small cosmetics empire and enjoying admiration from the men around her. *God Help the Child* is, much like *TBE*, riddled with tales of sexual abuse and violence, but the shame of dark skin is turned into a force that Bride knows to exploit, both through her clothes and the promotion of her raw beauty as she wears no make-up and chooses to dress only in white, initially at the behest of one of her colleagues. It is only when she reconnects with her past that she obtains her true identity and stops commodifying herself.

In the opening chapter of *God Help The Child* Morrison shows the beginnings of Sweetness' life is already flush with shame – shame inherited from her grandmother, a high yellow woman who does not want to be associated with the rest of her black family and cuts ties with her siblings and family:

> "I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I can think of yet her hair don't go with the skin. It's different – straight but curly like those naked tribes in Australia. You might think she is a throwback, but a throwback to what? You should have seen my grandmother; she passed for white and never said another word to any of her children. Any letter she got from my mother or my aunts she sent right back, unopened. Finally they got the message and let her be". (3)

We remember this same history from Soaphead Church in *TBE*. He is a white man with African blood in his veins. Most of the high yellow characters in Morrison's two novels try their best to present themselves as white. The quack and pedophile minister Soaphead Church and the high yellow housewife Geraldine both detest any form of "filth" or connection to "ugly" little black girls like Pecola. Soaphead inhabits the gothic trope of the mad scientist, as he is the one who "gives" Pecola her blue eyes and thus pushes her over the edge from sanity to madness: "I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But *she* will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right to do so" (144).

Pecola is raped repeatedly by her father and in a downward spiral of madness her wish for blue eyes is confirmed by Soaphead who imagines he has done God's work by letting the girl have her wish fulfilled. With the two sisters Claudia and Frieda as bystanders Pecola removes herself from society and falls into a fantasy world where she has blue eyes and an invisible friend who tells her that she looks beautiful.

In *GHTC* Sweetness proclaims "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?" (Morrison *GHTC* 4). Sweetness and Pauline share the experience of giving birth to a dark-skinned child, births that set the stage for Bride's successful life and the tragedy that is Pecola's life:

> I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me. Her birth skin was pale like all babies', even African ones, but it changed fast. I thought I was going crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes. I know I went crazy for a minute because once – just for a few seconds, - I held a blanket over her face and pressed. (Morrison *GHTC* 5)

Sweetness mirrors Pauline's attempts to hide her daughter and cover up the fact that she is the "midnight black, Sudanese black" (Morrison *GHTC* 1) child's mother and not just her nanny. Passing is one of the main themes of the movie that Pecola is named after, whereas we have seen the daughter of the black housekeeper is ashamed of her mother and not vice versa. Morrison best illustrates the fear of and shame in being black when both mothers in the two novels ponders the idea of strangling their daughters to avoid the shame and stigma that goes with very dark skin.

The mechanics behind lighter skin are obvious – plantation owners raped or seduced slave girls who subsequently had light-skinned babies. These unions rarely became a normal part of the master family due to racism and the laws on miscegenation, but the bloodline followed light-skinned people like Soaphead and Sweetness for generations. Passing African-Americans were sometimes known to cut all ties to their black families to assimilate completely to white American life, and some would take on the role of the tragic mulatto, never fitting in to either community[3]

In *TBE* Pauline goes to the cinema and in equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap (95). This contrasts greatly with the love between Bride and Booker as Bride sees when she goes out of her comfort zone to find out why Booker walked out on her. "Thank you. You showed me rage and frailty and hostile recklessness and worry worry worry dappled

[3] See also Nella Larsen *Passing* (1929).

with such uncompromising shards of light and love” (Morrison *GHTC* 150). “Then he offered her the hand she had craved all her life, the hand that did not need a lie to deserve it, the hand of trust and caring for – a combination that some call natural love.“

The Breedloves’ family culture is based on the inherited shame and loss of innocence in both Pauline and Cholly, throughout their lives. It is lack of anger and an inability to let go of her own innocence - a destructive, but naturally childlike naïveté - that finally destroys Pecola. According to Otten, Pecola is “dangerously naïve and fully capable of accepting the idea that a socially defined beauty alone merits love” (12). To Pecola, Sammy’s strategy is implicitly not available, be it due to gender, age or personality. Pecola does have similar feelings as her brother, during her parents’ fights, wishing one would kill the other, but she keeps her innocence intact by not expressing them. Instead she turns the anger inward, wishing she could die herself. The shame of being a part of a dysfunctional family takes its toll on her, as is seen in her interaction with the boys at school:

> …they gaily harassed her. 'Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnecked. Black e mo. Black e mo. Ya dad sleeps necked. Black e mo...' […] That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant”. (Morrison *TBE* 50)

Pecola’s brother Sammy underlines the hereditary and generational aspect of the MacTeers’ shame and helps pull Morrison’s narrative up from the individual level into the historical and social spheres. Woodward argues that “not only are the sights of potential shame seemingly everywhere, shame is also passed on from one generation to the next” (218). While this is true, it seems that Woodward forgets that both generations in the Breedlove household have *two* parties, i.e. Pauline and Cholly, and Pecola and Sammy (see also Feng 62).

The slight critical attention Pecola’s brother Sammy has gained may be due to the fact that

> …much excellent critical attention has been paid to the foreground story of the Breedloves, but few commentators have considered the background stories in the novel. Understanding the implications of Morrison's subtle […] references can aid the reader in interpreting Morrison's text, and is the key to discerning the range of the cultural critique Morrison is making in *The Bluest Eye*. (Gillan 284)

In the fight scene between Cholly and Pauline early in the novel, we are presented with what must for the children be an everyday event inside the four walls of their home. Sammy's violent reaction to his mother's attack on his father is nevertheless heartbreaking and shows his lack of childhood innocence. "Sammy, who had watched in silence their struggling at his bedside, suddenly began to hit his father about the head with both fists, shouting "You naked fuck!" over and over and over [...] Sammy screamed, "Kill him! Kill him!" (Morrison *TBE* 33). Sammy is the same age as his father was when he ran away. In his "runaway" rebellious state he mirrors his father's reactions to life's shameful events, and he also uses his ugliness in a way that is reminiscent of his father's violent actions: "Sammy used it as a weapon to cause others pain. He adjusted his behavior to it, chose his companions on the basis of it: people who could be fascinated, even intimidated by it" (Morrison *TBE* 29). The relative lack of criticism regarding Sammy is surprising, as this character underlines part of the point that the name Breedlove makes – shame is inherited through generations.

The Breedlove name is in itself highly ironic, both due to the lack of parental love, but also because of the seed that Cholly leaves in Pecola, a seed that does not come to fruition in this narrative. Cholly and his family are not able to gain love from their surroundings and hence are not able to give love to each other, a condition that leads Pecola to madness and forces Sammy to run away from home.

Unlike Sammy and Pecola, Bride finally experiences an episode of healthy parental care during the narrative. One of the characters who influences Bride the most at the end of the novel is Bookers's aunt Queen Olive. As a part of Booker's mysterious past she has a purifying effect on Bride as she sees clearer than the couple does what is

going on in their relationships. Queen has all the information and works as an advisor for both Bride and Booker. From Queen we can draw parallels to *Beloved* matriarch Baby Suggs, Queen is also the voice of the past. When Bride meets Queen Olive for the first time, she is immediately drawn back into her childhood and remembers the degradations of racist harassment. In her superficial way of looking at the world she does not recognize that Queen sees her as what she is and looks past the glamour she presents herself with.

> For the past three years she had only been told how exotic, how gorgeous she was – everywhere, from almost everybody – stunning, dreamy, hot, wow! Now this woman with woolly red hair and judging eyes had deleted an entire vocabulary of compliments in one stroke. Once again she was the ugly, too-black little girl in her mother's house. (Morrison *GHTC* 144)

Where Pecola went insane and Cholly turned violent, Bride has spent her life erasing her perceived ugliness by faking the identity of Bride, to try to forget the little girl Lula Ann. Queen Olive is a matriarch, an old woman who has been where Bride is: "I was pretty once, real pretty, and I believed it was enough. Well, actually, it was until it wasn't, until I had to be a real person, meaning a thinking one" (158). Bride is coming to terms with this same way of thinking, when she has begun her journey to look for Booker, she puzzles herself several times by seeing people as they are and not only judging them by their appearances. "Queen has been through all of this, and now she lives alone in the wilderness, knitting and tatting away, grateful that at last, sweet Jesus had given her a forgetful blanket along with a little pillow of wisdom to comfort her in her old age" (159). With all her many children, who have taken important positions in society and many husbands from all over the world, Queen reads as a symbol of African American culture. Her house of the past is centered around her many handmade fabrics and antiques, and her wisdom and eventual death by fire can be seen as the past giving way for the future.

The positive and naïve ending to Bride as focalizer sees the couple looking forward into a future of love and safety. The last words are though from Sweetness: "Listen to me. You are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works and how it changes when you are a parent. Good luck and God help the child" (178). In the same

chapter, Sweetness explains that she could not let her daughter "go bad": "By the time she turned twelve going on thirteen I had to be even tougher. She was talking back, refusing to eat what I cooked, primping her hair. When I braided it, she'd go to school and unbraid it. I couldn't let her go bad" (178). Sweetness is convinced that by not giving in to the white gaze and accepting the shame of it, Bride will go bad. Sweetness is voicing the opposite of Baby Suggs and Queen Olive's messages, as they want African Americans to love themselves and ignore the efforts to shame them. Sweetness has internalized the white gaze and lets it guide her life completely, to the point that she tries to choke Bride as a baby.

Queen's role as a harborer of the past is even clearer in her dialogue with Booker on his reasons for leaving Bride. He has not been able to lead a normal life due to the guilt and anger over his dead brother and Queen calls him out on his enslavement of his brothers' memory. "You called Adam back and made his murder turn your brain into a cadaver and your heart's blood formaldehyde" (157). Queen helps Booker realize the nature of love as he asks himself "what kind of love is it that requires an angel and only an angel for its commitment?" (160). He now knows that Bride is not the undemanding angel that he initially enjoyed so much. Much like Bride realizes that real people are flawed, Booker needs to learn that his fight with Bride does not mean that their relationship is broken.

It is in Queen Olive's house of the past that the couple can come to understand the nature of love and the true demands of the future. When Olive's house burns down they must also let go of their past and open up for a different interpretation of themselves, their past and their surroundings. After her meeting with Queen's house of the past, Bride goes through her last step of transformation, as she

> woke in sunshine from a dreamless sleep – deeper than drunkenness, deeper than any she had known […] Having confessed Lula Ann's sins she felt newly born. No longer forced to relive, no, outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father. (162)

Bride has saved herself by traveling into the past looking for truth and love, and it is only when she has confessed to Booker that her body reasserts its black womanhood.

3.2. Representations of violence and violation

Central to *TBE* is black-on-black violence, depicted through the destructive Breedlove family and contrasted with the more normalized household of the MacTeers. The school children also underline this violent black society as they pick on each other in school. They use societal white preferences in their teasing and belittlement of Pecola and each other. There are several levels to Morrison's narrative. Both the individual and the societal levels are well-covered in the criticism surrounding the novel. The level that has been attracting a somewhat lesser focus is the familial. Morrison presents the situation of the Breedloves early on. Baum's article on alcoholism in *TBE*, sheds some light on this plight of the African American people and minorities in general.

> Drunken aggressiveness is a cultural defense mechanism which serves to alleviate stress and hostility in America, and it is a defense mechanism that largely freed the aggressive drinker from guilt. Alcohol serves as an "Excuse" which is used by both the drinker and other family members in order to maintain an image of normalcy and non-deviancy to both themselves and their society. […] The drunkard finds himself, if not beyond good and evil, at least partially removed from the accountability nexus in which he normally operates. (Baum 4)

She further shows that "drunken aggressiveness is likely to occur more frequently in subcultures in which individuals find that strongly established societal goals are unavailable" (Baum 4.) The reason that this aggressive behavior is often let out on members of the drunkards family is according to Strauss, that "cultural norms support a male-dominant balance of power in the family" (Baum, 5). This balance makes it easy for, in the Breedloves' case, the father to unleash his shame and guilt on the weaker member of the family. The narrator describes Cholly as "reeling drunk" (Morrison *TBE* 127) on the day of him raping Pecola. Society is given part of the blame for his actions, not only is he more or less an alcoholic, but he is also a rape victim himself, and certainly a victim of racism and parental neglect. There is scientific consensus that some "African Americans overly identify with an oppressed-identity; [and] may become hyper sensitive to racism and overreact in ways that

create additional problems. African Americans who internalize their oppression are predisposed to acting their oppression out in ways that increase rates of social problems" (Danzer 18). Cholly's actions is a good example of such internalization that is rooted in a long tradition of white racism and violence.

Cholly‘s own first experience with violence is when he is forced into raping a girl. The much later rape of Pecola is initiated as her father is raped: When a drunk Cholly turns to Pecola for some twisted form of love and meaning, he sets her off on her downward spiraling journey to the "blue void" (Morrison *TBE* 162) of insanity. It is her innocence that in the first case sparks his interest – he senses her love for him, which also repulses him. But as he sees her "[shift] her weight and [stand] on one foot scratching the back of her calf with her toe" (Morrison *TBE* 127) he repeats his gesture towards a young and more innocent Pauline, on his daughter - caressing her leg, driving himself to an incestuous rape that triggers Pecola to seek out Soaphead Church to help her get blue eyes.

Ironically, Cholly rapes his daughter because he does love her, but what should have been fatherly love turns to an aggressive incestual act due to Cholly's lack of both interpersonal attachment and other emotional connections. Cholly could have been the villain in *The Bluest Eye*, but his actions are open-mindedly portrayed and the pivotal rape of his own daughter is based on his love for her. Cholly's journey is described in detail for a full chapter and sets off the tragedy that destroys Pecola by the end of the book. During his upbringing with his aunt he enjoys the rare support of the older man and father figure Blue and is taken in by his aunt as his mother leaves him on the doorstep when he is a newborn.

In her foreword Morrison says that she "mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. That is, I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse". In this she explains how she lets the narrator portray Cholly's actions, and perhaps trigger less disgust and more understanding in the reader. She wanted the reader to be "moved", instead of only "touched" (Morrison *TBE* Foreword). Cholly could be seen as a villain, but he reads to me more like an anti-hero due to Morrison emphasizing

the racism of the sociologic background of his flaws and aggression. Cholly's inability to connect to another human being, due to bitterness and disappointment, leads him to cross a boundary between paternal love and sexuality. His lack of fatherly love for his children stems from him "having no idea of how to raise children; and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be" (Morrison *TBE* 126). It is clear that Cholly distances himself from his surroundings to be able to survive his traumas and shame.

When Pecola is staying with the MacTeers she menstruates for the first time. The intimate conversation that follows between the three young girls in Claudia and Frieda's bed foreshadows the misunderstood love that Cholly turns towards his daughter, the love that will aid in the destruction of Pecola. The passage also implements the different love songs sung by both Mrs. MacTeer and Pauline Breedlove throughout the narrative:

> After a long while she spoke very softly. "Is it true that I can have a baby now?"
> "Sure", said Frieda drowsily. "Sure you can."
> "But… how?" Her voice was hollow with wonder.
> "Oh", said Frieda, "somebody has to love you."
> "Oh." (Morrison *TBE* 23)

Pecola turns to quack and fake minister Soaphead Church for redemption. Church is arguably the most villainous character of the two narratives, but as Morrison again dives deep into his background, she assigns some of the responsibility of his actions to his surroundings. "After her violation Pecola, in her madness, goes to him to ask for the blue eyes that represent harmony, joy, and beauty, eyes that signal worthiness and belonging. Pecola seeks self-respect and beauty to combat the "ugliness" identified with her blackness" (Otten 22). Soaphead is himself one of the mixed race who strive to hide their blackness. His forefathers have instilled a shame in him, urging him to stay above the black community. In his twisted way he thinks he can communicate with God and take his place as Pecola's savior.

> Did you forget about the children? Yes. You forgot. […] You forgot how and when to be God. That's why I changed the little black girl's eyes for her, and I didn't touch her; not a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. […] I played You. And it was a very good show! (Morrison *TBE* 144)

Pecola's lack of anger makes her believe what this old pedophile quack tells her – she will get her blue eyes. As she watches how "God" accepts her animal sacrifice of Bob, the dog, she is convinced that her wish has come true. Morrison describes the fulfilling of Pecola's wish: "So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (Morrison *TBE* 162). Her fall is partly due to the shame culture in her family, i.e. the impossible standards of beauty that her mother has incorporated in the children's upbringing, and that society has in its turn incorporated in her. Cholly's lack of self-love and absence of insight into his own shame makes him turn against Pecola. In her need for affection and love, his betrayal sets her on her way down the spiral to her downfall. Pecola's lack of anger makes her more of a victim than her parents are. She turns her own and their shame inward. The result is that instead of responding to the world in anger, she escapes into insanity, a world wherein she can exist on her own terms.

The Bluest Eye has been controversial and banned from schools in North America since it came out in 1970. Much of this controversy obviously stems from the depictions of sexual abuse of minors, and incest. Both Cholly Breedlove and Soaphead Church are grown men who channel their shame, resentment and sexuality towards children. The shocking and minutely presented episode between Cholly and his daughter, where the readers are forced to witness incest, is a recipe for controversy. What may be even more challenging to the reader is that Cholly is the focalizer, presented in a seemingly neutral light. Instead of judging his intolerable act, Morrison tries to show why it happens, what builds up to it and what goes on in the perpetrator's head during the act. Morrison herself tells us in the afterword that she did not feel like she was successful in moving the reader, only touching them. To move the reader she would have to facilitate a shift in our thought, ideas or attitudes

towards the content of the text. I do not wholly agree that she does not succeed – but there may be cultural codes that do not apply to me as a Norwegian reader.

Cholly's first shaming happens when his mother abandons him as an infant. He grows up with his mother's aunt and has an OK childhood, surrounded by middle-aged women. In his teens he later experiences shame twice in one day: First, there is one instance of slight shame where he can "reassert himself as an equal to the shamer" and hence "resolve the shaming" (Woodward 220), and one instance where he cannot reassert himself or challenge the authority of the shamers.

First, being teased by some other boys as they give him a cigarette to smoke, he is "shamefaced," but due to him being at the same level as the teasers, he is able to rise above the shame. Although the level of shaming is much crueler and severe in the next instance, there is a possibility of a line being drawn between the two incidents. In neither case does Cholly do anything wrong, but one of the instances proves fatal to both his own and, subsequently, his daughter's future. Later, the same evening, as two white men force him to "rape" his date, Darlene, he is left helpless. He does not reassert himself as an equal to these men, as he was able to do earlier in the day when he is confronted with the cigarette-smoking boys. Worse, he turns the "obscene violence of these men not back against them in self-defense and retaliation, but against Darlene" (Woodward 221). The white men brutally force Cholly to continue his mock intercourse. ""Come on, coon. Faster. You ain't doing nothing for her. Hee hee hee hee hee heee" Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it – hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much" (Morrison *TBE 116).* Both Cholly and Darlene try to hide their eyes – "her instinctive reaction is to hide her eyes as a way of shielding herself from the shaming eyes of others" (Woodward 221). "Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him" (Morrison *TBE* 118).

Cholly would never have been able to conquer the white men – they are not his equals and not, like Darlene, Pauline and Pecola, weaker than him. His sudden hatred for Darlene foreshadows his hateful relationship with his wife. He cannot turn it against someone stronger than himself at this moment, and although he later establishes himself as a ruthless, misogynistic alcoholic and killer of "three white men"

(Morrison *TBE* 125), his hatred and anger towards his wife later in life arises from this shame. "They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless " (Morrison *TBE* 118).

This lays the foundation for much of Cholly's problems and is the first instance where he is facing the reality of racist violence. It is the moment when he is no longer an innocent adolescent, but is brutally forced into manhood, a state that lets him become an abusive, incestuous alcoholic. Woodward shows that Morrison takes care to underscore that Cholly never reveals his shame to anyone (222). He does not acknowledge it and he does not speak it. He does not confess it to anyone and ends up fleeing the town to go to Macon in search of his father, where he once again is shunned by one of his parents. Cholly has been innocent once – he has loved. His love for his foster mother - his mother's aunt - and for the patriarchal figure of Blue, shows that he was able to have a normal relationship with other people and enjoy the innocent things in life: The dripping heart of a freshly crushed watermelon mixed with his friend Blue's stories (Morrison *TBE* 105), the chitchat of caring elderly ladies (109) and the companionship of a funeral (109).

Woodward sees Cholly as "forever changed by what happened that day, stunted in some horrible way, never able to piece the parts of his life together in a way that brings a measure of understanding to the shame" (222). She argues that Cholly cultivates his hatred and uses it as a screen against humiliation and shame, that he is determined to be angry and hate instead of feeling shame. He is poor, his wife hates him, he does not know his children and he becomes an emasculated alcoholic, subsequently losing control over his life, both materialistically and emotionally speaking. "He poured out on [Pauline] the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact. […] Even a half-remembrance of [the Darlene] episode, along with myriad other humiliations, defeats, and emasculations could stir him into flights of depravity" (Morrison *TBE* 32).

What must be mentioned is the moment when he is turned down by his father, whom he looks up in the hope that the man will have something to offer him. Cholly is homeless, exemplifying another classic gothic trope, several times during his life and is rejected by both his mother and his father. Unlike Pecola's, his hatred and anger

does not pass quickly. But neither him nor Pecola show any deeper understanding of their own shame and are never able to work with it instead of letting it ruin them. Pecola goes insane in an almost imploding motion and Cholly's shame only leads him to hate both himself and those who are weaker than him, in the first case Darlene and later on his wife. Cholly ends up being a destructive and violent force in the lives of himself and his daughter, not to say his entire family. Pecola never turns her negative emotions outward and never lunges out to attack the world that looks down on her, she turns her shame inward and remains the rest of her life the little girl who longs to be white.

The rape of Pecola is not a one-time device by Morrison. Child sexual abuse is a corner stone in both *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* and other novels by Morrison. Cholly's experience is very much in the realm of abuse. Soaphead Church abuses children due to his hatred of human kind and the filth and funk that grownups bring to the table. Bride‘s disloyal friend Brooklyn had an uncle who fondled her. Booker's older brother Adam is kidnapped, raped and murdered, his remains later found with only a shirt on. His aunt, Queen, has a daughter who says her father molested her. This claim follows Queen into her senior years, long after she and her daughter have lost contact with each other. A grownup Booker witnesses a man pleasuring himself next to a school and following his intense grief and inability to process his brother's murder Booker beats up the perpetrator, and continues on his way to his university class as the predator passes out from the beating. The boy who lives next door to Bride in her childhood is raped by Bride's landlord and she is forbidden from mentioning it to anyone as her mother is scared of problems following Bride's witnessing the act. Sweetness does not want to risk being thrown out of the apartment. Rain, the little girl whom Bride befriends after her car accident was also abused by her mother's clients per her mother's request. And last, but not least, Sofia, to whose prison sentence Bride strongly contributes, is molested by her uncle. "Quiet as its kept" is a line that befits sexual abuse of children as well as racism towards African-Americans. Children rarely tell on adults, and the traumas often impact the victims. Adults have power over the children in a way similar to how whites for a long time had power over African Americans. Like child abuse impacts and often traumatizes the grown person, racism impacts and traumatizes African Americans and their communities.

> 60% of black girls experience sexual assault by the time they reach 18 […] It is still baffling to me that this is an issue that African-Americans are reluctant to discuss and aggressively address. […]The prevalence of children being sexually abused is somewhat of a conundrum, because [the black community has] attributes of a collectivist culture […] yet there are these trends of sexual violence against children that are not being sufficiently addressed. […] I believe [the reason] is most likely related to a convoluted web of systemic oppression, intergenerational transmission of abuse and personal culpability. (Hargrove 2017)

The man who murders Booker's brother is described as "the nicest man in the world" (Morrison GHTC 111), showing us that violence and horror is always a possibility. *The Bluest Eye* has two incidents of child abuse or attempts of it. *God Help the Child* has almost innumerable episodes. The link between child abuse and racism is strong and Morrison shows that the two may have similar traumatic effects on children into their adulthood. Ramirez explains how the gothic shadow of the past influences the children of *God Help the Child*:

> Morrison explores the curse of the past, the legacy of slavery and its aftermath, and its hold on the present, through the phenomenon of colorism. Racism and intra-racial discrimination based on the skin color result in childhood trauma. Children may adopt coping strategies to resist maltreatment or they may internalize oppression and accept self-loathing. (145)

Not only do many of the children in both my thesis novels face sexual abuse, but they also grow up in households where neglect, verbal, physical and emotional abuse is common to varying degrees. This doubling of traumas that Morrison does makes it easier for readers of all ethnicities and ages to relate to the horrors that trauma inflicts on the characters. It is quite ironic when Booker relates to the reader that his brother's murderer did not mind raping and killing black boys, "clearly an equal-opportunity killer, his victims seemed to be representatives of the We Are The World video" (*GHTC* 118). Booker's trauma and silence related to his brother's murder is mirrored in Bride's trauma from her childhood. They both have secrets that they keep from one another, traumas stemming partly from violence towards children. Morrison ends *God*

Help the Child and her fiction writing with a positive outlook for Bride and Booker, but she at the same time warns us that children need society's protection, much as African-Americans need a system that works for them as well.

3.3. Doubling father figures

Doubling is a common trope of gothic fiction. It can work on the inter-character level, the intra-character psychological level (think Dr. Jekyll), but the narrative itself can also double its backdrop of society, as in the doubling of the Dick-and-Jane world versus reality. The central premise of the double motif is "the paradox of encountering oneself as another; the logically impossible notion that the 'I' and the 'not-I' are somehow identical" (Li). It is this that Morrison tells us she wants to achieve in her foreword to *The Bluest Eye*. She wants us to encounter ourselves as Cholly, as Pecola, as Geraldine. In Morrison's novels she spotlights the reason behind racism with a classic mirroring between the white man and the African: "Doubling also foregrounds the motif of mirroring, in particular the projection of one's fears, desires and anxieties onto the Other, which becomes an uncomfortable reflection of ugly traits that the self refuses to acknowledge. The Other thus reveals the social ills and moral decay that society tends to ignore" (Li). Herein lies the platform of systemic racism.

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison creates a tragic anti-hero in Cholly Breedlove. His shame and his degradation in the face of racism has turned him into a monster, but he garners our sympathies because Morrison shows us WHY and HOW Cholly became an incestuous alcoholic who lacks the ability to care for his family. We follow his shame back to his childhood, back to when he was innocent of how the world sees him. In the novels I have included in this thesis there is often this duality present – the way the world sees you and the way you see the world. In Pecola's case she wants to view the world with blue eyes and she wants to be viewed by the world as a girl with blue eyes. She is in a twisted way able to achieve the latter of these, but only by turning insane in her need to be white. Cholly turns aggressive and flattens himself and his emotions more and more so that he has to go to violent extremes to feel something again. That is why we as readers can accept him as an antihero and not just a villain. Morrison knows that we will sympathize and understand if he is more than a villain.

Morrison doubles Cholly with another father, Mr. MacTeer. Cholly stands in stark contrast to Mr. MacTeer, who is presented as a protective and strong man who always hovers in the background as a guardian of his family and their well-being. Z. I. Burton claims that Mr. MacTeer goes unmentioned in the narrative: “It is interesting to note that Claudia’s father goes unmentioned, in contrast to Pecola’s complicated father whose actions are devastating and far-reaching” (Burton 77). I disagree. As a matter of fact, Mr. MacTeer introduces the segment “Winter” and is here seen through Claudia’s eyes in several gothic nature metaphors and similes:

> My daddy’s face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there. His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to avalanche; his eyebrows bend like black limbs on leafless trees. His skin takes on the pale, cheerless yellow of winter sun; for a jaw he has the edges of a snowbound field dotted with stubble; his high forehead is the frozen sweep of the Erie, hiding currents of gelid thoughts that eddy in darkness. Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills. A Vulcan guarding the flames, he gives us instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, lays kindling by, discusses qualities of coal, and teaches us how to rake, feed, and bank the fire. (Morrison *TBE* 47)

She clearly sees him as a protector and has great respect for him, his presence is steadfast as a rock. He is a part of the nature that the “girls from Aiken” try to move away from, he teaches his daughters how to survive, how to exploit resources around them and it is clear that the focus on inherited shame and destructive secrets is weaker in the MacTeer household than in the Breedlove’s house. The fact that Claudia uses pale and cold colors to describe his features may show that he is also emotionally aloof, but her vision of him is generally one of awe and great respect. He is naturalized by the similes he is seen as and hence presented to us as something that is as unwavering to Claudia as nature itself. Their standard of living also comes clearly across in as Claudia describes her father. The tension of poverty leaves the head of the family even more strained than the rest of the year – trying to keep the cold out by teaching the girls to guard the flames. Mr. MacTeer and Sammy are examples of how attention to background characters is important in this narrative.

The protection and presence of Mr. MacTeer is one of the reasons Claudia and Frieda have more resources with which to face the racism of the society they grow up in. He is also protecting them from Mr. Henry, who is one of three men in this narrative with pedophile tendencies. There are clear parallels being drawn between the raping of Pecola and Mr. Henry's alleged touching of Frieda: The latter is portrayed in an almost comical manner through the adolescent eyes of Claudia and contrast the sexual assault of Pecola, that no one intervened with and hence had a much more tragic outcome. Pecola has no protector. Where Frieda's parents wreak havoc on their lodger when they find out he has made inappropriate sexual advances towards their daughter, Pauline does not protect her daughter in the same way. She obviously knows that something is wrong as she finds her daughter lying unconscious on the floor in her own kitchen.

> Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. […]The tenderness forced him to cover her. So when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her. (Morrison *TBE* 129)

These text passages underline what Morrison says in her foreword:

> When I began writing *The Bluest Eye,* I [was not] interested in […] resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident. […] Couple the vulnerability of youth with indifferent parents, dismissive adults, and a world, which, in its language, laws, and images, re-enforces despair, and the journey to destruction is sealed.

Cholly is doubled with Claudia's father who in contrast to Cholly is able to look after his family. It is quite surprising to read Burton's opinion that Mr. MacTeer is absent from the narrative, as one can find numeral textual evidence that he creates a solid ground that clearly differentiates Pecola from the MacTeer sisters. In his actions he avoids both being an "indifferent parent" and a "dismissive adult". The contrast between the Breedloves as parents and the MacTeers is also clear when Claudia

reminisces about her childhood sicknesses and her mother's hands care for her lovingly: "So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands that does not want me to die " (Morrison *TBE* 7) (see also Cormier-Hamilton, 120). These hands contrast Pecola's lack of love from her mother, both in the scene after the rape, but also the scene in the white household kitchen when she knocks over the cobbler.

The relatively safe and somewhat loving, although sometimes violent, atmosphere the MacTeers raise their daughters in, is lacking from the Breedlove household. This contributes to Pecola's inability to not let other people's opinions of her degenerate her sense of self. She does not have the love of neither her mother nor her father as a basis to build her self-esteem or identity on. The steadier the base, the better.

> In their search for knowledge of who they are as individuals, they long for the protection, safety and love that will preserve a singular "self". Unfortunately, in *The Bluest Eye,* children act out in aggressive ways to protect themselves. And their aggression mirrors that of their parents and the greater white culture. (Schreiber 65)

Cormier-Hamilton asks if we can ignore the fact that Claudia stays so strong throughout is that she was raised on love. Unlike Pecola, who is raised in a highly violent household, Claudia has never seen violence between her parents. Claudia's home is not marred by an alcoholic, traumatized father and a mother who is away most of the day, taking care of white children (Cormier-Hamilton 120). Claudia's parents are not perfect, but she is raised in a household that is not characterized by the neglect and absence of love between family members that shape the Breedloves' relationship.

Though *The Bluest Eye* is a novel that is generally most known for its female inhabitants, the male characters and their stories stood out to me immediately as I read it for the first time twelve years ago. In the epistolary hit essays *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin (1963) and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) the struggle of being a black man is shown and the authors try to educate their sons and nephews in the art of acceptance and self-love in the face of the horrendous American history of slavery and oppression. In Baldwin's seminal work *The Fire*

Next Time he tells his nephew that there is no reason for him to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for European Americans' impertinent assumption that they must accept *him*.

> […] For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. […] The danger, in the minds of most Americans, is the loss of their identity. (Baldwin 16)

The worst part of being a black man is that he has to accept the white man, for the white man will not change his identity of superiority. Ta-Nehisi Coates continues this line of argument to a much rougher degree in *Between the World and Me:*

> …the elevation in the belief of being white, was not achieved through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies. (Coates 8)

Coates does not coat the negative influence that white power has had on the black body and hence black identity. White power was claimed through violence and degradation, not through being white, but through the supposition that white is superior. Coates mirrors Booker's emphasis on the economic aspects of the slave trade as a foundation for the racism that pervades the United States.

In his book *The Event of Post-Colonial Shame* (2011) Timothy Bewes quotes Jean-Paul Sartre: "In literary works, shame does not exist in some buried state, to be unearthed by the penetrating critic, rather, shame appears overtly, as the text's experience of its own inadequacy" (3) and continues on white readers of black prose: "If these [novels] give us shame, it is not with that conscious purpose, they have not

been written for us. All those, colonist and accomplice, who open this book, will have the sensation of reading [,] as though over another's shoulder, words that were not intended for them" (4).

How then does Morrison convey these black men's shame to me as a white reader? How does she as a female writer convey male shame to me as a female reader? In her hit collection of lectures, *Playing in the Dark* (1992) she writes:

> As a reader (before becoming a writer) I read as I had been taught to do. But books revealed themselves rather differently to me as a writer. In that capacity I have to place enormous trust in my ability to imagine others and my willingness to project consciously into the danger zones such others may represent for me. I am drawn to the ways all writers do this […] I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from […]. My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. (4)

I find that it is Morrison's role as an intellectual and teacher that makes her able to convey her narratives to both men and women, both white and colored. By emphasizing the societal background in her narratives and characters, she presents the reader with a larger historical context and thus opens up for a better understanding of her critique of racism in the United States.

There are four male characters in these two novels that I take a special interest in, Cholly, Sammy and Soaphead in *The Bluest Eye* – and Booker in *God Help the Child*. Cholly and Booker are also polar opposites in *TBE* and *GHTC*. Cholly is never able to exact any revenge over what has happened to him, neither the disappearance of his father nor the attack on him and Darlene. Booker lets his rage out on a child molester who has been on the prowl near the faculty kindergarten at his university. He does not hesitate to beat the man to death and has no qualms about walking back to class, only changing his bloodied shirt in the process. In this example, Booker is Morrison's ultimate antihero. Cholly and Booker are doubles; Cholly is a tragic antihero whereas Booker is a paternal antihero who manages to survive in a society where Cholly goes

under. Although Claudia and Pecola see Cholly as a villain, Morrison conveys the reasons behind his choices and his anger. None of the most obvious villainous characters in the narratives are pure villains. Even Soaphead Church, paired with his *God Help the Child* double Sweetness, comes through as a victim of a racist society first and then as someone who is traumatized to the extent that he cannot develop a normalized identity and emotional range. The gothic villain Cholly becomes a tragic anti-hero in Morrison's hands. Where Cholly is a failure as a paternal figure, Booker is quite the opposite. Not only is he a normalizing figure in Bride's life, he also teaches her that her skin is just something superficial that is no one's fault. This knowledge evidently seeps into Bride as she passes it on to Rain and possibly her own child. Through his upbringing in an intellectual family that thinks critically about race and his resistance to the view that white is better, he is able to try to create a different world view than his mother-in-law.

3.4. Refusing shame – narrative resistance

In the midst of two narratives inhabited by black people internalizing racism, hiding their blackness to pass for white and breaking down or erasing their own culture due to the white racist society, Morrison creates two strong opposers in the doubling characters of Claudia and Booker. The two characters inhabit the same message as Baby Suggs' speech in *Beloved*: Love the skin you're in.

Claudia is important as focalizer in *The Bluest Eye*, both because she is similar to Pecola in age and socioeconomic circumstance, but also because she has an insight into Pecola's life that no one else outside the family has and "moral authority rests not on the child Pecola, whose story as the ultimate non- being is presented on the first pages of the novel, but rather on Claudia who, as eyewitness, astutely narrates Pecola's rape story" (Salvatore 155). Claudia also underlines Morrison's message of the terrors of the racist white gaze. She violently refuses to accept the beauty standards of the racist society, standards that she is confronted with on a daily basis. She destroys white dolls and attacks high-yellow Maureen Peal because she does not think that they are more beautiful than she herself is. Claudia's young voice is in strong opposition to Pecola's adopted ideas of beauty, appreciating the filth and stains that are a part of their lives. As Morrison tells us in her foreword, Claudia shares

many of the thoughts and emotions that Morrison herself experienced when her friend told her she wanted blue eyes. Morrison uses words like rage and shock, she could not comprehend why her friend did not realize her own beauty, but instead wanted something so out of reach and unnatural as blue eyes.

In her article on female resistance Amanda Putnam argues that this is how Claudia can ascertain her own identity and distance herself from white oppression and the limited frame that little black girls have to live within. Putnam finds that Claudia is trying to rise above the limitations that society is forcing her to live with.

> The violence—sometimes verbal, but more frequently physical—is often an attempt to create unique solutions to avoid further victimization. Thus, violence itself becomes an act of rebellion, a form of resistance to oppressive power. Realizing their own worth is in question, young black girls attempt to upset white oppression by redefining the limits of their power and powerlessness - reacting to the oppressiveness of white dominance […] with physical violence to find strength within […] positions of weakness. (Putnam 26)

Claudia and her refusal of shame is doubled in *God Help the Child*'s Booker. We see the message of *Beloved*'s Baby Suggs in both these characters, through emotional naïveté or hindsight for young and old Claudia, and through the emotionally stunted, but angry and academic lens of Booker. The economic and social ramifications of the slave trade are visible in *God Help the Child*, as Booker fabulates over his choice of economics as a university major rather than African American studies, and comes to a rather gothic, dystopian conclusion:

> He suspected most of the real answers concerning slavery, lynching, forced labor, sharecropping, racism, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, prison labor, migration, civil rights and black revolutioin movements were all about money. Money withheld, money stolen, money as power, money as war. Where was the lecture on how slavery alone catapulted the whole country from agriculture into the industrial age in two decades? (Morrison *GHTC* 110)

Morrison discusses the origins of racially induced shame through Booker. He does not accept the shame that is given to him, and he wants to understand the structures of American racism, because he realizes that the shame he is supposed to feel comes from an innate systemic flaw that relates directly to his country's nation-building history.

Albeit dysphoric in tone he does try to teach Bride a valuable lesson regarding her skin tone, and this message is also purveyed in a much more childlike manner by Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*. "It's just a color, […] A genetic trait – not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin.[…] 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" (Morrison *GHTC* 143). He echoes Coates' message to his son when he underlines the fact that white people have needed racism to create their identity. Bride later shares this message with the abused child Rain, explaining to her that her cat is black just because it was born that way, without linking any value on either side of its color. Booker is trying to right the wrong that he sees is influencing Bride's life to such an extent that she is not connected to her true self, and Bride adopts his views as the narrative progresses.

According to author and activist Martinez, Booker is right on the money in his critique of what she calls white supremacy. To say that it is a system of racism is correct exactly because "supremacy means a power relationship exists" (16), which it very much does. She further looks at the origin of white supremacy as it links to the history of the United States and argues that it is in fact fundamental to its existence. Martinez also underlines the role that slave labor has had in the building of the Unites States as a nation of industrial corporate economy. Booker is a fitting tool for Morrison to point out the mechanics behind the racist philosophy that she sees has formed the economy of the United States, one of the most powerful economies in the world - made possible only by trade founded on a vast slave industry.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have analyzed Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* in terms of the gothic tropes that help Morrison's readers understand the cultural constructions of shame. Through my attentions to the intertextuality of the two novels, I have added to previous scholarly discussions by focusing on gothic tropes in two narratives that are rarely analyzed in this light and through this I have tried to give a refreshing look at Morrison's critique of systemic racism and the white gaze. I have shown how these two novels double each other in relation to both theme and characters. The African American situation is based on centuries of oppression and violence towards the black body, starting with the politics of slavery during the transatlantic slave trade. The dark past of slavery creates an intrinsically gothic experience for African-Americans, generating a culture of inherited shame that prevails into our time.

I have shown how Morrison through her many focalizers, a fragmented narrative form and gothic tropes critiques the innately racist view that white is considered more beautiful and how this destructive notion spreads throughout the black community and influences African Americans in different ways. By creating a distance between the reader and the narrative, she makes it easier for the reader to experience her narratives both emotionally and intellectually, and in this way she welcomes the reader, regardless of his or her ethnicity or location, to partake in her social critique.

I have further discussed how the white gaze has been used to enslave and degrade the black body, a body that Morrison speaks directly to in her latest novel by deconstructing the protagonist and reassembling her into her true identity. Racism influences each person differently and I have discussed its impact in the narratives on both male, female and adolescent focalizers, with their different challenges in the face of oppression. This critique permeates Morrison's narratives from beginning to end of the novels I have discussed and is also the main focus in her academic writing and teaching and it has never been more current than it is now. I have presented Morrison's narrative resistance to systemic racism and white beauty norms by letting two characters pick apart the shadows of the past and the master's oppressive gaze.

At this point I feel like Toni Morrison has been as much of a teacher to me as the rest of my professors at the university, her writing has made a lasting impact on me and I believe she has taken me as close to an understanding of the African American situation as I can have as a white woman in Scandinavia.

In the future I would like to see more critical focus on the men in Morrison's narratives, as well as her urban settings as contrasted to the countryside from a gothic and nature writing perspective. Morrison's work will be a source of cultural critique and poetic impact for many years to come and I feel privileged to work with her literature and her intellectual views on America.

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Illustrations:

- Page 7: An advertisement for Pears' Soap, from the 1890s, instructing whites to promote cleanliness among other races, Wikimedia Commons.
- Page 20: 1890s UK Vinolia Soap Magazine Advert, Alamy Stock Photo.
- Page 33: Silver Screen Magazine Cover, March 1935, Amazon.com poster.