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The Bluest Eye and God Help the Child
Toni Morrison and Her Interrupted Children

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Introduction

“What you do to children matters. And they might never forget” (*God Help the Child* 43).

This short quote, pronounced by the mother-character Sweetness, perfectly summarizes what Toni Morrison wants us to remember after reading her first and last novel *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*. A quote that also wants to dismantle the simplicity wrongly attributed to children: just because one is a child does not mean she is immune or naïve: childhood is a complex and fragile age, and thus it needs great attention.

This dissertation focuses on the complexity of childhood, but more precisely on the two female protagonists of Morrison’s two abovementioned novels, Pecola and Bride respectively, and their tough experiences as children marred by physical and psychological abuse that lead to identifying them as *interrupted* children: children whose development has been arrested. Almost fifty years after the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison returns with *God Help the Child* on the topic of a difficult childhood, this time enriching the discourse of the child with a reflection on the inner child in the adult protagonist. Bride is, in fact, a young woman, but her narration addresses her past, trauma, and pain, elements that recall the same experience of the little girl Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. This study is, thus, a comparison between their two journeys that follow two different paths but share many similarities. An analysis that is constructed on the theories by the pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald D. Winnicott. In fact, with the support of his theories concerning the development of the “normal individual” and the “environmental factors,” the aim is to show how the two protagonists end in this state and how it is possible to rescue and heal them.

Winnicott’s voice is used to scientifically explain the behaviors of Morrison’s characters as they are presented in the two novels. Both Winnicott and Morrison refer to

childhood as a complex concept in which several forces work together in the development of the child. These forces derive from the functions accomplished by the “facilitating environment” and the “good-enough mother,” whose combined action result in a healthy individual. Morrison, on her part, increases the complexity of this mechanism leading our attention to specific features of the environment such as the White Gaze. It is the factor that permeates the two novels as the pattern of the environment the characters have to confront, an element that, according to Morrison, cannot be ignored. Racism and White supremacy influence the interrelation between characters: the suffering deriving from the hostile environment affects Pecola and Bride as well as those who, for instance, belong to their families. In this sense, Morrison wants to demonstrate how the development of a child can be further damaged when those who should support and protect the child, in the end, are dealing with the same painful reality and, thus, are unable to achieve a positive intersubjectivity fundamental for the child’s normal development.

This dissertation is structured into four chapters divided into sections that aim to explain the causes of the interruption in Pecola and Bride, the type of interruption the two protagonists experience, and, finally, how the two novels suggest that their wounds may be healed and the normalcy in their identities may be restored.

More specifically, in the first two chapters, the focus is on the environments of home and society, dealing with the role of the family, especially motherhood, and the cultural experience dominated by White standards. The third chapter analyses the coping strategies of the two protagonists who, due to the emotional battering and physical abuses they had to suffer, end in the fragmentation of their “True Self” interrupting their development and creating a “False Self.” Lastly, the fourth chapter discusses how the healing process of the two interrupted children occurs thanks to Winnicott’s principles of “concern” and

“responsibility” which take place on three different levels within the novels: between characters, in the the narrator, and in the communication between Morrison and the reader.

In short, this work aims to offer a reading of Morrison’s two novels through the vocabulary that Winnicott employed to describe the factors that play a crucial role in the development of healthy children. Winnicott provides the key to interpret the deepest existential truth of Morrison’s masterful art of fiction.

Chapter 1

Home Is Where We Start From

1.1 The Healthy Development of an Individual

This title was chosen by the three editors – Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madeleine Davis – for the collection of papers, talks and unfinished drafts written by the English pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott. A title that, in our case, constitutes the first meeting point in this dissertation that aims to place side by side the two novels by Toni Morrison – *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* – with the neuropsychiatric's theories. This title is, in fact, emblematic because it perfectly explains the editors' choice in selecting the sources to demonstrate Winnicott's interest in linking the individual's development to the family and to the society in general (C. Winnicott et al. 5). Home is the starting point because it embraces two aspects: the house where the child finds protection and nurturance and the first environment in an individual's life. Home is also the place where the child grows up and first interacts with other human beings – his family – responsible for his education and knowledge of the outside world. Home is the beginning in a child's development of the self and how it is shaped and experienced will keep echoing once the child will be part of the larger environment of the society.

Toni Morrison emphasizes the importance of the home as well. Throughout the two novels here presented, we understand that home and the family are the main part of the protagonists' characterization. The household environment forms their identities and in the same way breaks them with physical and emotional abuses. It is at home that Morrison's characters learn how to love, to hate and to struggle. Some of them grow up in a healthy home-environment where they receive love and caring and are able to act all this out in the

community and the reality outside their houses; others are mistreated, traumatized and raised without being able to fill that initial lack of love, empathy and social identification.

Both Winnicott and Morrison place a great importance on children and childhood. The first by using a scientific method based on observations and experience in the analysis as pediatrician, the second by using the art of fiction to narrate stories and characters that engage readers to confront the complexity of humanness through the specific life events of two young girls: Pecola and Bride. Both in the essays by Winnicott and in the novels by Morrison, the main issue about children and childhood concerns their development, the process of growing and the elements involved in it. In the novels as well as in Winnicott's psychoanalytic essays, the child is at the center of a relational system in which different forces join and complicate the child's development.

In psychology, in fact, the development of an individual refers to the complex process that aims to the equilibrium between inner (intrapsychic) and outer (interpersonal and social) aspects of the individual's reality and it allows the development, if it is linear, from a child to a stable individual (Steinhauer and Rae-Grant xiii-xiv). This achievement is possible if, according to Winnicott, there is a continuous interaction between "environmental factors": elements that belong to the reality surrounding the individual and which determines, positively or negatively, his outcome. The reason why the functions of the environmental factors are fundamental stands in how Winnicott defines a child:

The individual baby is born with inherited tendencies that fiercely drive the individual on in a growth process. This includes the tendency towards integration of the personality, towards the wholeness of a personality in body and mind, and towards object-relating, which gradually becomes a matter of interpersonal relationships as the child begins to grow up and understand the existence of other people. ("Children Learning" 45)

As we can notice, the child is born with the capacities to become a stable and healthy individual. However, the development of a child is related to where it takes place and to whom is supporting it during the process. In fact, the development

takes place in the individual child if good-enough conditions are provided . . .

The forces towards living, towards integration of the personality, towards independence, are immensely strong, and with good-enough conditions the child makes progress; when conditions are not good enough these forces are contained within the child, and in one way or another tend to destroy the child.

(“Providing for the Child in Health and in Crisis” 65)

The conditions, which are the “environmental factors”, are then fundamental for the child. If he does not learn how to put into practice his tendencies, his capacities, the risk is to “destroy the child”. This means that the child will feel a loss, an empty space on his path and his future condition will be the consequence of the failures experienced during childhood. For this reason, Winnicott emphasized the importance of the two factors that influence the development of the child: the facilitating environment, also called the good-enough environment, and the good-enough mother.

The facilitating environment must have a human quality and avoid a mechanical perfection (“Children Learning” 45) – that is why “good-enough” – and it helps the development of the individual by supporting him. It comprises the good-enough mother, the family at large and those who belong to the individual’s social experience such as the community, the society and the world in general. Together with the good-enough mother, they enable the child “to exist, to have experience, to build a personal ego, to ride instincts, and to meet with all the difficulties inherent in life.” (“Primary Maternal Preoccupation” 304). At the beginning the child lives in a subjective world due to his lack of sense of reality,

a stage called “unintegrated” (“The Concept of a Healthy Individual” 9-10). Gradually, thanks to the role of the mother and the influence and support of the environment, the child undergoes a process of integration, the constitution of the self, which is the gathering and acquisition of information, called units, that the child has learnt through experience. Winnicott perfectly summarizes the process in a talk given to the Association of Teachers of Mathematics where he played with the word “sum” and its meaning in Latin as “I am” together with its arithmetic meaning in English of addition. The process of addition (of “sum”), which is the process of integration of all the units “me” and “not-me” – acknowledged from the closest circle of the family up to the community and the society – ends in the creation of “a wider concept of wholeness” which is reaching the Latin “sum”: I am (“Sum, I Am” 18-19). In this sense the ego moves from an unintegrated state to a structured integration and develops into a healthy individual who knows who he is and who he is not. “[T]he central feature in human development is the arrival and secure maintenance of the stage of I AM” (“Sum, I Am” 18) which can be reached by developing the inner world and the knowledge of the outside world. The only way to do it is to experience as much as possible and learn, with the help of the environment and the good-enough mother, what the self identifies as “me” and by repudiating what is “not-me”.

In this sense, the environmental factors must perform a role of support for the child as well as they must express a sense of caring and demonstrate that they are reliable so that the child can trust them and feel protected. Given all these elements, the child is able “to have a personal existence, and so begins to build up what might be called a “continuity of being” which is a linear path of development (“The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship” 166). But this emotional development can be interrupted at any stage if the facilitating factors are not satisfied. For instance, if the mother fails in her role or if the environment happens to be hostile, it is plausible that the individual receives a trauma which Winnicott defines as “the

breaking of the continuity of the line of the individual's existence" ("The Concept of a Healthy Individual" 9). If a component of the emotional development is missed, if a piece of the linear path of the going-on being falls off, if the units of the self have not been added to the "sum", the personal fulfillment can be interrupted, and the child may have difficulties during the interaction with the reality that surrounds him and during the development of his behavior.

Ideally, childhood should be the age of innocence, joy, and precious memories, that period of life where an individual learns the unconditional love of the parents and, if there are, of the siblings. However, Winnicott and his theories make childhood more complex; he places the child and her development in the middle of a greater mechanism where different elements must be considered fundamental during the growing process: as it was mentioned before, childhood involves an equilibrium between the intrapsychic, interpersonal and social aspects of the child's reality (Steinhauer and Rae-Grant xiii-xiv). Considering that the two narrations of Pecola and Bride display damages at all these levels and a failure on the part of the environmental factors, they are not able to experience what is deemed a normal development. Instead, their stories narrate the breaking of the supposed-to-be linear path and make them the reason why we consider them *interrupted* children. Each interruption in the development of the two children-protagonists is related to a trauma, an emotional or physical abuse which fractures the identity and removes the possibility to reach a whole and stable identity. As the title of this chapter suggests, it is the "home" – and what it implies – the first environmental factor responsible for the protagonists' status of interruption: home is where Winnicott starts from his analysis, and home is the first place where the interruption of Pecola and Bride occurs.

In the following chapters we will plunge into the theories by Winnicott as well as into the two novels by Morrison, and by analyzing the fundamental mechanism of the

development of a healthy individual, we will understand where the interruptions occur. By placing side by side Morrison and Winnicott we try to understand the interrupted state of Pecola and Bride not as a phenomenon in isolation as if they were an exception of childhood, but by discussing the interruption of the two protagonists we will be able to practice the method that, in Winnicott's opinion, represents the right way to deal with a casework: "In any piece of casework a decision has to be made on who is the ill person in this case. And sometimes, although it is the child that is put forward as ill, it is someone else who is causing and maintaining a disturbance, or it may even be that a social factor is the trouble" ("The Child in the Family Group" 41). From this quote, it is clear that we should be looking at the interrupted state of Pecola and Bride as part of an environment with its factors, triggers and issues: to do so we attempt, together with Claudia MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*, to discuss about the "how" and to disclose the "why" that determines the outcomes of Pecola's and Bride's lives.

1.2 The Hostile Home Environment: Dysfunctional Family and Failed Motherhood

Since the title of this chapter refers to the home-environment, this second section analyses what home implies, that is, the family and in particular the role of the mother – who is the focus of several studies accomplished by Winnicott. The family is “a group whose structure is related to the structure of the individual personality” and it is the first grouping the child interacts with and is influenced by (“The Child in the Family Group” 41). It works as a system whose equilibrium determines the development of the child. If the family is intact and stable, it does more than meet the child’s physical needs, it supports the child and strengthens his sense of security. At the same time, it also influences the child at a social level by becoming the bridge between the household and the outside world. According to Winnicott, the key for reaching that equilibrium in a child lies in the possibility to rely on his mother and father (*Deprivation and Delinquency* viii) who have the responsibility to filter the experience of their own child, to protect him and to support him.

In the two novels here presented, Morrison stages two dysfunctional families which do not accomplish any of the roles previously pointed out. The Breedlove family is not united, each member of the family suffers the ugliness in his own loneliness: “Each member of the family in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 32). In the small two-room apartment there are “no memories to be cherished” (34) and “[t]he only living thing in the Breedlove’s house was the coal stove” (35). It is clear from the way that Morrison describes them, that the Breedlove family is not only dysfunctional, but it gathers damaged people who are so defeated by pain that they are folded in their “own cell of consciousness” concentrating on mending their distressed identities, their units of the self. Since they direct their sights only toward their own sufferance, they remain blind in front of Pecola’s destruction. By being damaged and unable to gather the pieces of their “patchwork quilt of reality”, they let extend the damage

from one to the other and break one of the main aims of children's development: intersubjectivity. They do not attempt to improve their situation because they believe they are ugly, they "wore their ugliness" and accept it. It is a home where children witness physical and verbal violence between the mother and the father, acts that become part of their everyday life and ends in being repeated by the son too. Sammy, Pecola's brother, takes part in the fights between their parents, he hits his father, he shouts "You naked fuck!" (42) and he incites his mother to "Kill him! Kill him!" (42). In the meantime, Pecola hides traumatized by the scene and asks God to just let her fade away. The Breedlove family does not have an equilibrium, they do not take care of each other. Even between siblings who share the same violent experience there is no sense of closeness. Sammy, in fact, often runs away from the house and he never takes his sister along with him.

The Bridewell family is dysfunctional as well, in fact, from the very beginning of the novel, the parents did not welcome their own daughter as a gift but labeled her as the "enemy" responsible for the ending of their marriage. While the father abandons them and never comes back in the narration, the mother, named Sweetness, and her point of view on the society is the figure who most influences Bride by raising her through neglect, silences, and emotional abuse. Like Pecola, Bride experiences the same emotional estrangement from her family and the house becomes the place of painful memories where she can establish a stable relationship with neither her mother nor her father.

Within the family system, the crucial role belongs to the mother or, as Winnicott defines, the good-enough mother. Since she is the bearer of the child, and traditionally the parent-figure who mostly dedicates time and attention to the baby, she is also the environmental factor that most influences the child's development and establishment of her own identity. Winnicott associates the role of the good-enough mother with the "primary maternal preoccupation", something that is born as a psychological condition, and which

subsequently develops into “a state of heightened sensitivity” during the pregnancy period (“Primary Maternal Preoccupation 301). It escalates especially in the first few weeks after the birth of the child and can be read as the sense of love and affection toward the baby, an attitude on the mother’s part of full dedication and focus on the caring of the child. It develops in the attitude of adaptation that the mother performs in response to the child’s needs, called the “identification for the maternal care” (“The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship” 166) which places the needs of the child above her own needs (“From Dependence” 85). This preoccupation opens the way to two further attitudes of the good-enough mothering: holding and handling. They both are linked to the sense of protection that a mother has to build around the child so that she feels safe and supported. The holding refers to “the total environment provision . . . determined by the awareness and the empathy of the mother ” (“The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship” 157-158): it is the mother’s act of protecting the child, in the sense that the mother behaves as a barrier creating a safe space where the child feels held and protected from psychological insults or difficulties due to the child’s “lack of knowledge of the existence of anything other than the self” (“The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship” 162). Handling, conversely, is related to more physical acts that express a sense of caring and affection such as touching, hugging, kissing the baby. The combination of holding and handling is what the child experiences as motherlove and it brings up the sense of reliability that is fundamental in the relationship between the mother and the child as well as the child with the rest of the home-environment. If these conditions are not satisfied, the child is affected and the sense of protection that should surround her does not take shape, it falters. If on the part of the parents, especially from the mother, the protection and support are missing, the consequences could weaken the child’s own sense of confidence or self-esteem: the strength or the weakness of the self depends on “the actual mother and her ability to meet the absolute dependence of the actual infant at the beginning . .

. Where there is not-good-enough mothering the infant is not able to get started with ego maturation, or else ego-development is necessarily distorted in certain vitally important respects” (“Ego Integration in Child Development” 56-57). In other words, the good-enough mother is responsible for the constitution of the self’s units that will be part of the “Sum, I am”.

In the two cases of Pecola and Bride, the motherhood embodied, respectively in Pauline Breedlove and Sweetness Bridewell, widely differs from the normal and healthy idea formulated by Winnicott. Although their names, Breedlove and Sweetness, suggest an idea of love and caring or kind words and affection, the motherhood they perform fails in more than one aspect and affects the development of their children. In particular, they both fail in creating a safe environment, they do not display any identification with their own babies, and they do not perform the attitudes of handling and holding. Instead, their daughters become the one responsible for their shattered fantasies about pregnancy, marriage and happiness.

Initially in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline seems to display her primary maternal preoccupation once she gets pregnant with Pecola. She feels a glimpse of happiness that helped her forgetting about the miserable marriage with a violent and drunk man like Cholly. She is, in fact, careful and avoids all those movements that can affect the baby; she even has a “friendly talk” with her belly: “I’member I said I’d love it no matter what it looked like ... On up til the end I felted good about that baby” (*The Bluest Eye* 122). Then, as it happened with Sammy, the happy pregnancy meets the reality, or more precisely, the reality hits her when she is alone and in pain in the waiting ward at the hospital. When she was pregnant with Sammy, she started going to the movie theatre where she could live in the magical dreaming world of the moving picture. There, in the dark of that theatre she succumbed to her juvenile dreams: the perfect and beautiful romantic love and physical beauty. Also, to keep living the same illusion of the movies, she started fixing her hair like the actresses. But when

one of her teeth fell, she was tossed back to her harsh reality and realized she could never be one of those movie divas: she “settled down to just being ugly” (*The Bluest Eye* 122). The same disillusionment happens in the hospital when pregnant with Pecola. There she is not brought to reality by the fall of a tooth, but by the behavior of two white doctors who not only compare her with an animal, but they insult her as if she was not even there because their kindness is already directed to the white women:

When he got to me he said now these here women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses. The young ones smiled a little. They looked at my stomach and between my legs. They never said nothing to me ... I seed them talking to them white women: ‘How are you feel? Gonna have twins?’ Just shucking them, of course, but nice talk. Nice friendly talk. (122-123)

Her primary maternal preoccupation is then put under pressure by the environmental factors that surround her, an environment which does not allow any way of escaping the poor and ugly reality and keeps on thwarting any attempt at being happy. This sense of impossibility is so rooted in her that when Pecola is born, Pauline states “She looked like a black ball of hair ... A right smart baby she was. I used to watch her ... But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.” (122-124). Pauline is unable to even hope for a better life for Pecola: the gaze Pauline feels judging her and preventing her happiness is the same that she imposes on her daughter. Pecola is ugly as the reality the Breedlove family is living in, where there is no way of escaping, not even through the love between a mother and a child. For this reason, Pauline does not even try to create a safe space, in Winnicott’s terms, she does not accomplish the holding and not even the handling by avoiding physical contact as well as by demanding Pecola to call her Mrs. Breedlove. In this sense, Pauline disconnects herself from the mother role and takes refuge in her own

reality whose access she precludes to her husband and her children. A reality where she just takes care of herself through the obsessive sense of religion and her job at the Fishers, a white family.

In this regard, it is interesting to point out another theory by Winnicott about the process of illusion and disillusion which belongs to the role of the mother. She, in fact, must give the illusion to her child that everything is like she expects. Then, gradually and gently she must disillusion her, showing that the reality does not always correspond to the expectations and, therefore, helping her adapt and grow (*The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* 91). As a result, the child moves from a state of absolute dependence on the mother toward the adaptation to a new environment where she learns she is not the center anymore. Evidently, Pauline does not accomplish this kind of role. Instead of creating the necessary illusion for her daughter, she put her needs above it and prefers escaping in her own illusion where she can preserve herself and cope with the reality. She ends preferring her small reality at the Fishers' than her family and home. In their white house she is Polly the "ideal servant" (*The Bluest Eye* 125) and there everything is under her control, perfectly tidy and organized. She even shows more love and affection toward the Fisher's child than toward her own children: the little white child can call her Polly, while her own daughter must call her Mrs. Breedlove. Pauline becomes so protective of the Fisher's house that she does not want her children to enter as they could manage to ruin something. This attitude is perfectly demonstrated by the scene where Pecola accidentally drops the hot berry cobbler in the Fisher's kitchen splattering the "blackish blueberries everywhere" (106) on that brilliantly polished white kitchen and painfully on her legs. A good-enough mother would have reacted by helping her child cleaning off the blueberries and alleviating the suffering, but Pauline is so far from that idea. In fact,

In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to 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 . . . ‘Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor. (107)

Pauline is not worried about her daughter, she is worried because the dirt has ruined her perfect white reality; her voice is broken, and she keeps on repeating “my floor” as she were claiming her most precious possession. On the top of that, she also decides to avoid any tiny little piece of empathy for Pecola, she transfers all her attention and care toward the white little girl who has started crying from the shock of the scene. When the white girl asks who that black girl was, Pauline whispers like “honey in her words”: “Don’t worry none” “soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl” (107). From this act of tenderness reserved to the white child instead of her daughter, it is obvious that Pauline has no space for Pecola in her world, she has banned her from that house as well as from her maternal care and unconditional love. It is not possible to state that Pauline keeps on disillusioning her daughter, because it could imply that she did create illusions for her; instead, behaving in this manner, Pauline is saying that Pecola is not even worthy the attempt.

The process of illusion and disillusion is not fulfilled by Sweetness as well. This process requires the mother to become a filter of the reality and by filtering she creates an illusion for her child. Then, once the child is able to deal with the true reality, she gradually abandons her role of filter and lets the child fully experiences the world. The reason why it is important to perform it is, again, to avoid a trauma and the development of insecurities, low self-esteem and lack of reliability. Sweetness never becomes a filter, she preferred throwing at her daughter Bride the cynic and harsh view of the environment that surrounds them, a

white society where black people have to survive and create no trouble. For this reason, the novel opens with Sweetness's first-person narrative and the short sentence: "It's not my fault" (*God Help the Child* 3). Her words, however, are not referred to the fact that she affected the growth of her daughter and their relationship, instead, she wants to make sure that the reader knows that it was not her fault that Bride was born with such a dark skin. Unlike Pauline, Sweetness does not spend words about her happiness before the delivery or how she discovered she was pregnant. She goes straight to her major delusion, the issue that changed her loving maternal attitude toward Bride:

It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black ... 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 ... All I know is that for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat. I went to bottle-feeding soon as I got home. (3-5)

From her words, it is obvious that Sweetness does not show any primary maternal preoccupation. She is so scared by the physical appearance of her daughter that she is close to commit a murder by suffocating the baby. The physical appearance – skin color and beauty – is the first thing that Sweetness and Pauline point out after their daughters are born.

However, on the one hand, for Pauline it demonstrates that she cannot escape the ugliness of her life and Pecola has to slide underneath the same "cloak of ugliness" (*The Bluest Eye* 37) of the Breedlove family which separates them from the traditionally White

beauty standards. On the other hand, for Sweetness it is pure shock because of her being light skinned as Bride's father. Having a daughter with dark skin is an issue she does not want to deal with. In Sweetness's family the skin privilege has always had a great importance: her grandmother passed as white and to not ruin this privilege she broke every relation with her own children. Grown in these circumstances, she welcomes her daughter Lula Ann with embarrassment and sadness as well as a contempt for the basic expression of love: physical contact through breastfeeding. Her own eyes cannot tolerate the vision of her daughter, she is a throwback of a heritage that she would prefer to abandon on the steps of a church. Yet, she does not do it because she is moved by pity, but because she fears to be considered "one of those mothers who put their babies on church steps" (*God Help the Child* 5). It seems like she avoids this decision for fear of being judged again: first for the skin color of her daughter, then for her being "that kind of a mother". Therefore, Lula Ann, before she can even form her own idea of self or being able to see herself in a mirror, starts her life with a mother who identifies her as the Other, a stranger, someone far from the family and deeply detached from her own mother. The absence or limited physical contact with her own daughter is not enough for Sweetness, she has to create a safe zone for herself, so she imposes on Lula Ann to call her "Sweetness" not "Mother" because: "It was safer" (6).

Considering Winnicott's theories, we understand that the protagonists are subjected to a failure of the caring process that should have been carried out by the mothers. In the case of Pecola, there is a hint of the "primary maternal preoccupation" when Pauline shows affection toward her belly and expresses some feelings of love. However, both Pauline and Sweetness embody what we could call an "anti-primary maternal preoccupation" because of the changing direction of the process: the two daughters have to adapt to the mothers' needs. Pecola has to accept the ugliness and that her mother prefers the Fisher's house and child; little Lula Ann has to atone for the pain she has (unintentionally) caused on her mother by

adapting and accepting every request imposed for the “safety” of her mother. Nonetheless, both novels do not address just a failure on the part of the mother, Morrison takes the analysis much deeper. Winnicott, indeed, assigns roles and functions to the mother, but, as it was said before, casework requires a wider view. Pauline and Sweetness fail as mothers, they do not help their daughters in healthily assembling themselves, but they cannot carry out this objective because of the damage that pervades their own lives in the first place. These two mothers cannot foster a healthy development for the children because they cannot process the pain rooted in their own lives present in their identities: they are interrupted as well. Pauline sees all her fantasies and all her efforts to escape the ugliness of her situation being shattered and, in the end, she has to adapt to reality and hang on to those little sources of joy she can gather such as her job at the Fisher’s and the white girl. In the same manner, Sweetness, who has been damaged by the vision of the world imposed within her family, does not have the capacity to teach a different perception of reality to her daughter, she can just pass on the same ideas and misconceptions that had shaped her during her childhood. Morrison is thus showing a failure of motherhood which does not follow any of the functions pointed out by Winnicott, but since she is placing the two interrupted girls in a broader context, in order to tell their stories properly, she must consider the “someone else who is causing and maintaining a disturbance” (“The Child in the Family Group 41) which is pointing out the desires, disappointment and, most of all, the pain that Pauline and Sweetness hold and break them making impossible to come in their roles as mothers fully. Morrison is, then, transferring into motherhood an interruption that started earlier in the selves and feelings of these two women

To illustrate how the interrelation between people, especially between damaged people, is crucial in the interruption of the development of children, another element to consider is the one suggested by Winnicott’s book-guide for parents *The Child, the Family*,

and the Outside World that presents another important rule that mothers should strictly follow: “The mother does not involve the baby in all her personal experiences and feelings ... Over and over again mother deals with her own moods, anxieties, and excitements in her own private life, reserving for the baby what belongs to the baby” (87). Neither Pauline nor Sweetness follow this rule, they both make the mistake to place their needs and issues first and – another aspect that Winnicott warns about – they both put their daughters in the middle of their relationship with the husbands and trap them in the pain they have experienced. In this respect, it is interesting to highlight the role of fatherhood as Winnicott defines it. The fact that he ascribes the main role in the development of the baby to the mother, does not mean to say that the father has not got an active role. First, because a stable and healthy relationship in a marriage can help support and define the experience of the child; secondly, because the father is a moral support for the mother “backing for authority”. Thirdly, he has the role to express “his positive qualities and the things that distinguish him from other men, and the liveliness of his personality” (115). Having said that, Winnicott concludes that in the end it is the mother the one that defines the relationship between father and child, it is in her power “to make such a relationship possible, or to prevent it, or to mar it” (118).

In the Breedlove family, children are always part or witnesses of the failed relationship between Pauline and Cholly. As we have already pointed out, the fights between wife and husband are part of the everyday life. Violent and degrading acts are not concealed from the eyes of Pecola and Sammy: Cholly is always drunk, the communication is based on insults and bad words, and sexual intercourses are performed in the only bedroom without considering there are children. Cholly is one of the reasons why it is hard for Pauline to come back home, he is a reminder that her life is not worthy, and it will never improve. He is also the reason why her life is so miserable that forces her to “[bear] him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (*The Bluest Eye* 124-125), and to beat into her son “a loud

desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (126). Nevertheless, the worst act of fatherhood and motherhood that Cholly and Pauline could ever do against Pecola and her development is Cholly’s rape. This abuse hits Pecola twice: first when she is abused and gets pregnant of her father’s baby, and then when her mother does not believe her. The job of a father is supposed to be a shield that protects the mother as well as the children “from unpredictable external phenomena” (“Providing for the Child in Health and in Crisis” 71), but by committing the abuse, Cholly is the one who has brought the danger into the house and has changed the home-environment into an environment of pain. Moreover, the attitude of Pauline of not trusting her daughter demonstrates, again, how she is unable to connect with Pecola and to play the role of a caring mother.

While in *The Bluest Eye* the failure of fatherhood and motherhood and the relation between them take shape into a physical abuse, in *God Help the Child* it all converts into a psychological abuse. In fact, according to the definition, a psychological abuse is a “repeated pattern of parental behavior that is likely to be interpreted by a child that he or she is unloved unwanted”, besides, it can be expressed by belittling and ignoring the child (Laskey and Sirotnak 656). This is the exact way that Sweetness and her husband’s behaviors works toward Bride. In her narration we understand that another source of this lack of love, on the part of the mother as well as the father, is rooted in the abandonment by the husband Louis. Contrasting Winnicott’s theory that the relation between wife and husband should never interfere in the child’s life, Sweetness blames Bride for the end of the marriage with Louis. Since the color of the skin is too dark, he is certain that Sweetness has cheated on him, but despite her efforts in convincing him that Bride is in fact their daughter, “He never touched her” (*God Help the Child* 5). Moreover, when Sweetness accuses him of this dark-skin-heritage, “he just up and left” (6). Bride, then, does not have any relationship with her father,

she is too little to even remember him; but still, she is damaged by his absence because Sweetness forces her to accept it as another reason of why she is unloved. His abandonment confirmed Bride's role of stranger and enemy in the family, it also causes an even stronger determination on Sweetness' part to be hard on her daughter.

Up to this point, the discrepancy between Winnicott's elements of the good-enough mother and the attitudes displayed by Pauline and Sweetness is vast. We have seen as both Pecola and Bride experience a maternal abandonment on an emotional level due to the lack of empathy and caring by their mothers. Since the two novels present a desire to disclose the "why" of the outcomes of the protagonists, it is time to move our analysis outside the home-environment and acknowledge the outer hostile environment that the characters experiences. It is, in fact, by learning what occurs outside their homes and taking into consideration Winnicott's theories about the cultural experience, the no-facilitating environment, that we can comprehend the link between home and society. Toni Morrison places a great importance on the external cultural factors that influence the two protagonists, especially with issues such as racism, colorism and White supremacy. By following Pecola and Bride's stories in the cultural experience, we learn the complex mechanisms behind the traumas that occurs in the relationship between the children and their mothers. Once again, as readers, we can take part in a journey that has the aim to reach the meanings of the "how" and the "why" of Pecola and Bride's interrupted development.

Chapter 2

The Hostile Cultural Environment: The White Gaze

As it was mentioned before, the collection *Home Is Where We Start From* aims to link the child's identity to the several environments that surround her starting from, the previously analyzed, home. However, it is not possible to elude the fact that home belongs to, and it is influenced by, a greater environment: the society and its cultural aspects. For this reason, the analysis of the two novels cannot avoid taking into consideration where and when the lives of Pecola and Bride are set. Looking at the cultural environment, we again attempt to discuss about the "how" and to disclose the "why" in the narration. This time by defining the "Thing" (*The Bluest Eye* 72) that Claudia MacTeer addresses as the reason behind the Breedlove family's "ugliness" and Pecola's craving for the blue eyes; and, in *God Help the Child* – even if it is not enclosed in this term – the reason why Bride becomes an all-white dressed woman and Sweetness struggles to love her own daughter. Recalling Winnicott's words on the elements that must be considered "[i]n any piece of casework" of an "ill" child, a social factor might be the trouble, the trigger that effects the individual and those who surrounds her ("The Child in the Family Group 41). Morrison's interrupted girls are part of a cultural environment which shapes them and the people that surround them. Adding the "Thing" in this discourse of environmental factors, Morrison is making the mechanism of the child's development even more complex and giving more significance to the damaged intersubjectivity that occurs in between the protagonists and the other characters.

The "Thing" is White supremacy or, as Toni Morrison calls it: the White Gaze. In the "Afterword" of the novel *The Bluest Eye*, she explains that when she was a child, she first experienced the burden of this gaze during a conversation with an elementary school friend.

Her black friend told her she wanted blue eyes to become a beautiful child, but God did not listen to her prayers, so it became a proof of the non-existence of God. It was from listening to these words that Toni Morrison learnt that “Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could do” (205). Beauty is “something one could do” in the sense that a person, in order to be considered beautiful according to certain cultural standards, can change her own physical appearance and be finally accepted. Once a grown woman, Morrison realized that what her friend desired derived from a strong feeling of racial self-loathing caused by the White gaze together with its White standards that impose a light-skinned girl with blue eyes as the symbol of true beauty (*The Bluest Eye* XI). The White gaze is, then, the peering eyes that condemn and belittle Black people, that force them to conform to these white standards. It is an intrusive gaze that is so destructive to cause a sub-discrimination in the African American community, called Colorism. The White gaze and its implications constitute a no-facilitating environment that influences and affects the society, the community, the family and, finally, as Morrison stated, “the most delicate member of the society: a child; the most vulnerable member; a female” (“Afterword” 206): Pecola and Bride.

Although the two narrations belong to two different and distant temporal frames, the issue of the “Thing” is as rooted in *The Bluest Eye* as in *God Help the Child*. On the one hand, Pecola’s story begins in the autumn of 1940, preceding the United States entering World War II and years before the Civil Rights Movement, in the segregated American landscape when the distance between black and white people was perfectly defined. On the other hand, Bride lives in our contemporary era, supposedly during Barak Obama’s presidency, in a cultural reality quite different from Pecola’s. Moreover, Pecola lives in Lorain, Ohio, one of the cities where a great amount of people, especially black immigrants, moved from the South seeking wider opportunities in the North (Smith 19). Toni Morrison

was born there and in an interview with Camille O. Cosby she said that in the 30s and 40s, that city was a “melting pot” with “immigrants from all over the world” (73) and where there was a strong sense of community among the African American people. Bride, instead, lives in a big city in California, in a multicultural society shaped by the capitalistic system and its incessant attitude of selling and buying, where black and white people coexist and work side by side as Bride and her friend Brooklyn. Yet, this harmony or absence of racial discrimination is visible only on the surface, the racist system is still enduring but in a more subtle way. Bride is the product of a context where racial discrimination has been passed on from mother to daughter, from the very beginning of her life and, when she becomes a woman, the same discrimination is still influencing her, even if she lives far from her mother.

In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison mentions the “Thing” without directly calling it as the White Gaze or White Supremacy, but instead lets the story and the characters’ interactions speak for themselves: from the narrator Claudia to the actions and the most intimate thoughts of Pecola. In the same manner, in *God Help the Child*, the issue of discrimination and the heavy burden caused by the white supremacy emerge from the first-person narrations and in the way of behaving of the characters. The characters and their actions, however, are not the only tool that Morrison employs in her novel to denounce the failed discriminating environment: the structure of the book is crucial as well. For instance, she uses a passage from the primer Dick and Jane as one of the prologues in *The Bluest Eye*. A choice made with the intention to allude to the White supremacy without directly addressing it. Dick and Jane were the characters of a series of Basic Readers – used to teach reading to kids – which employed the repetition of simple words and, at the same time, gave an ideal image of a white family living in a suburban area (Smith 20). Morrison uses an excerpt of few lines in the prologue, and then she repeats it twice: the first time without using

punctuation and capitalization, except for the first letter “H”, and the second time with no space between the words and between each line.

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty.
Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white
house. They are very happy. ...

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty
here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white
house they are very happy ...

Hereisthehouseitgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamily
motherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappy (*The
Bluest Eye*)

It seems like a refrain obsessively repeated up to the point it sticks in your head so you cannot forget it anymore. In fact, from the point of view of Pecola or any other black character of the novel, this is a literary choice that represents how to convey such a strong message on the continuously standardized idea of the perfect white life; like a daily reminder that black people have to attempt to reach that level of perfection even if it is quite impossible as the image it conveys belongs in a life designated by, and only accessible to, White people. To emphasize this struggle, Morrison uses the lines of Dick and Jane to structure the novel and to introduce the sections that are dedicated to Pecola and her family, showing the great difference between white expectations and black reality. Specifically, the contrast is defined in this sequence: Dick and Jane’s house vs. the Breedlove’s house; Dick and Jane’s perfect family vs. the violent and ugly Breedlove family; the cute Jane’s cat vs. Pecola and Geraldine’s cat scene; Dick and Jane’s very nice mother vs. the unconcerned Pauline; Jane’s smiling and sweet father vs. Cholly raping Pecola; Jane’s dog vs. Pecola’s killing Bob the dog; finally, Jane who plays carefreely with a friend vs. Pecola who now has a split

personality and talks to herself. Along the narration, this contrast with Dick and Jane's story becomes a warning for Pecola: she keeps on praying for the blue eyes and for becoming the pretty girl that everybody loves, but it will never happen because the sense of ugliness and the self-contempt is too deep in her and her family. Introducing the Breedlove family, Morrison writes that they decided to wear ugliness "although it did not belong to them" (*The Bluest Eye* 36),

You looked at them 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. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement . . . "Yes," they said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (37)

From these lines, Morrison wants to highlight that the ugliness of the family is not strictly related to their actual physical appearance, it is a status originated from a "conviction" given by a "mysterious all-knowing master" that is the White gaze. It imposes their ugliness: it dominates in the society, and it decides what is acceptable as beautiful according to its own standards. The Breedlove's inability to contradict this view demonstrates how much the racial system is deep-rooted in their existence and how much their reality is strongly influenced by what the White people want or decide.

Claudia is the character that helps the reader recognizing how the cultural environment strongly influences the youngest of the society. Her first-person narrative expresses the point of view of a little girl who experiences the consequences of the beauty standards, for instance, symbolized by the America's sweetheart and Hollywood icon Shirley

Temple, the typical rich white girl. The same standards that deny Pecola her uniqueness and represent everything that society finds adorable, everything worth having and which is not accessible for both Pecola and Claudia. Unlike Claudia, Pecola yearns for being like Shirley Temple, she eagerly drinks milk from a cup with the Hollywood's star face on it, as if it were a magical potion that could change her. She even buys the candy Mary Jane and "She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies had brought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named" (48).

The White gaze dominates this environment and produces culturally constructed images from which not even the children are immune. The idea that what is White is better, more beautiful, and special damages Pecola and forces her to face the fact that she will never be able to satisfy the unattainable expected standards. It is at this point that even an apparently harmless toy like a doll becomes in this novel a dangerous and painful element. Winnicott explains that a toy "is a bit of the real world, and yet if it is given in the right way at the right time and by the right person it has a meaning for the child which we ought to be able to understand" (*The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* 70). In the cases of Pecola and Bride a white doll is not simply a toy, it is the expression of a society where they are not accepted, it is the reproduction of a human being they cannot identify with. Claudia does not understand why she receives it as a gift, she does not like it and she is angry with the adults that expect her to love it. She wants to dismember it and understands why everybody treasures this "blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll" (*The Bluest Eye* 18). On the contrary, Pecola recognizes the blue-eyed doll as the representation of the utmost goal in beauty, the doll's physical appearance is the guarantee of fitting in the environment and, finally, be loved by everybody.

A simple toy brings us toward one of the most known theory by Winnicott, the Transitional Phenomena which explains how the self-discovery experience of a child operates. It refers to the phenomenon defined by an intermediate area (the transitional space) and a transitional object (a toy) that helps the child moving from his subjective reality toward an objective reality without being traumatized (*Playing and Reality* 2-3). This phenomenon involves transitional actions like playing and creativity which break the wall that divides the inner world (the self) from the outside world (the reality), and which also participates in the definition of the “me” and the “not-me” units of the self. The transitional object is not only a toy, but it represents an object “other-than-me” that the child, in fact, recognizes as the first object different from himself and part of the “not-me” units (*Playing and Reality* 2-3). The toy also functions as a comforter, helping to reduce the bad effects caused by the passage from a stage of absolute dependence – when the child benefits from the mother’s total adaptation – to the reality (*Playing and Reality* 9). In other words, it is the object that accompanies the child in the process of illusion and disillusion that has been pointed out in the previously analysis of the good-enough mother (*Playing and Reality* 16-17). More specifically, the transitional phenomenon is a stage of play for the child, because it is through the experience of playing with a toy that he starts experiencing the world (*Playing and Reality* 18). Winnicott explains that the activity of playing encourages the child to be free and creative, and by exploring and handling the toy, the child discovers his self (*Playing and Reality* 72-73). Since playing is tied with discovering and experiencing, the transitional phenomenon helps the child’s process of integration of units that ends in the formation of the “Sum, I Am”. For this reason, it is wrong to consider the doll in *The Bluest Eye* just a simple toy. It is through this toy that she experiences a distorted transitional phenomenon in which the doll is the transitional object that helps her accepts the doll’s qualities as the standards to look up to and what forces her to feel out of place and defective. In her case, playing is an

experience of pain; a reminder that she should be different, prettier and whiter, and thus ending in the creation of only “not-me” units, leaving no space for the “me” units. Just as Pecola, Bride’s activity of playing ends in a negative effect. The only scene which describes her in the act of playing and discovering is when she sneaks into Sweetness’s bedroom to look at her cosmetics and cologne, trying on her mother’s “Tabu lipstick” (*God Help the Child* 54). This short instant of playfulness is immediately ruined by the scene she witnesses from the window of the bedroom: Mr. Leigh sexual abusing a boy and then addressing her with the insult “Hey, little nigger cunt! Close that window and get the fuck outta there!” (55). The self-discovery that is supposed to occur while playing ends in the discovery of the brutality of people and their acts. Whether it is a doll symbol of white supremacy, or a play-moment ruined by a terrible scene, both the protagonists cannot experience a positive adaptation to the environment, their childish activity is always ruined by the harsh reality that keeps on hitting them with insults and self-loathing.

Supporting Winnicott's theory about a toy being a reproduction on a smaller scale of the reality that can have a strong impact on the child, there are the studies advanced by Kenneth and Mamie Clark providing a further clarification. In 1947, chronologically close to the temporal setting of *The Bluest Eye*, the two psychologists published the “Doll Study” who used dolls in a psychological and sociological research with the aim to investigate children's internalization of racial difference while developing their identity and self-esteem. The dolls of the test were brown with black hair and white with yellow hair (Clark 169). The children tested were males and females from all-over the United States and whose skin was: light (practically white), medium (light brown to dark brown) or dark skin (dark brown to black). The psychologists asked the subjects to indicate, for instance, the doll that looked nicer or bad, or the doll that the children identify with. The results showed that there was a clearly established knowledge of “racial differences” (170). Most of the children (67%) chose the

white doll and rejected the black one, the nicest doll was the white one (59%), the worst doll was the black one (59%); this meant that the preference, as the nicest and the best one to play with, was on the white doll (175). If we look in details, considering the skin color of the children, the percentages show that 60% of the children with darkest skin chose the white doll as the nicest, while the 67% of light-skinned children chose the black doll as the worst and only 13% of them chose the white doll as the worst one (176). It is clear that the skin color and skin differences were an issue that deeply influenced the children's knowledge. The way they carried out the test demonstrated that from the very young age, black children learn who they are and what they are not because of the cultural environment they experience. It showed that the level of whiteness deeply influenced the opinion regarding the children whose skin was darker. It was the effect that beauty standards had created: controlling images that allowed the formation of a sub-discrimination in the African American community, Colorism, and which had shaped the children's perspective on skin color up to the point that they used to sing the rhyme: "Now, if you're white you're all right, If you're brown, stick around, But if you're black, Git back! Git back! Git back!" (Hill Collins 89). Besides, during the study it was asked to justify the preference of the white doll, and most of the responses were related to the physical appearance standards: the white doll was better because pretty and white, the black doll was worse because black and ugly (178). Even if it is a study based on dolls, we notice that a simple toy can be part of a toxic environment and be a crucial element in the development of children's own identity. In the novel the doll encapsulates a damaging force as well as represents an obstacle for a little girl to create her own healthy cultural identity as an African American child. In this cultural environment, Pecola finds only a source of self-hate: beauty standards that oppress her and drive her self-esteems to the lowest level.

In *God Help the Child* there is neither a doll nor Dick and Jane to point out the White gaze. Instead, the novel is divided into first-person narrative sections (except for some parts in third-person narrative) where each character lets his or her mind speak. It is right in these confession-sessions that we can learn where the white gaze makes its entrance and how it defines Bride's life, specifically, in Sweetness's first-person narrative which powerfully opens the novel. Not only she demonstrates to the readers how much her name does not match her personality and her attitude toward her daughter, but she also justifies her way of raising Bride as a strategy to help the child surviving in the society. In this novel, the white gaze is strictly linked to the issue of Colorism as the reason why Sweetness is more embarrassed by the blue-black skin of her newborn than the fact that she is telling how much she hates that color. It is such a deep-rooted system in Sweetness's mind that she cannot even hide her delusion. In her opinion, Colorism is the only way to endure in a white society, she explains:

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

Let alone all the name-calling. (*God Help the Child* 4)

In a world dominated by white people, knowing that you are light-skinned, as it is Sweetness, it is an advantage that can place you above those who can never be able to escape the discrimination, those who are dark skinned. Besides, Sweetness comes from a family where the grandmother, who could pass as white, abandoned her own children in order to not ruin that privilege; and her mother could pass as white too, but she decided not to, and

Sweetness has always known “the price she paid for that decision” (4). Given this family history, it does not surprise that Sweetness is unable to see Bride beyond her skin color. Being a woman born in an environment where the skin color had always been a great burden, it is hard to distinguish her unconditional loving mother-attitude from the social severe system. In her opinion, colorism is the only way to give black people a bit of dignity and since her daughter is at the bottom of this color system, she cannot descend to her level and lose her dignity, she must protect herself from being hurt. Although the burden of the white gaze was more persistent in her times, in the nineties, when Lula Ann was born, she still could feel it: “Things got better but I still had to be careful. Very careful in how I raised her. I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble. I don’t care how many times she changes her name. Her color is a cross she will always carry.” (7).

Once a woman, Bride distances herself from her mother and her skin privilege system. We, as readers, meet a black woman who is now independent, successful with her career and driving a Jaguar. At first glance, without Sweetness’s harsh vision of the world, it seems that Bride fits perfectly in the environment as if now, being in the contemporary post-racial era, skin privileges and discrimination do not exist anymore or have lost their importance. When Jeri, her friend, suggests to wear only white, because it is the only way to emphasize the blackness of her skin, and because by exploiting her blackness she can satisfy the cultural prescriptive standards and obtain the job, she immediately accepts this change of look. But, as it may seem an innocent choice of outfit, what hides behind is still the white gaze. In fact, this new image of Bride recalls the child in the advertisement “Sunlight Soap” that is included in *The Black Book*, to whom Morrison contributed, and which pictures a smiling black baby wearing a white dress and a white hat with the phrase “So Clean and White” (Harris et al. 96). By placing Bride’s new look next to this advertisement, we see that in both

cases white is employed with the intention of magnifying blackness to magnify whiteness: whiteness will always be in a privileged and superior position. In a White supremacy context, this is translated into a discourse of powers: White people have the power of taking what is Black and controlling it as they want, changing it into their White idea of what is better and more acceptable. Jeri symbolizes White dominance and its presumption: he accomplishes the same strategy of the white supremacy that exploited the image of the baby in the soap advertisement. In addition, Jeri compares Bride to food, objectifies her body as “licorice skin”, “You’re more Hershey’s syrup than licorice. Makes people think of whipped cream and chocolate soufflé every time they see you” (*God Help the Child* 33). He changes her into what White standards find inviting and interesting and Bride, from that moment on, will significantly meet “adoring looks, stunned but hungry” (34). Furthermore, another element that suggests a sense of whiteness defining the protagonist’s identity is her name Bride. A name that recalls whiteness, lightness and which totally replaces her first name Lula Ann. Again, Bride’s identity depends on a white-recalling name, her black identity seems completed once she can display as much whiteness as she is able to: in her name and in her way of clothing.

Both Pecola and Bride are victims of an environment which does not facilitate a healthy development. Their lives are defined by standards, forces and cultural expressions which determine the reality that surrounds them and, consequently, that reality seeps through their house – the first environment they interact with – and their family – the ones who should be the filter and facilitator of that environment. The White gaze, the “Thing” that dominates the outside world of the two children-protagonists is not just a feature that defines their environment, it is the essence of it, and it is also crucial in their development. Through the two narratives, Morrison wants to highlight the burden that the “Thing” provokes in the child’s experience; a painful element that produces a hostile condition for healthy

development and, most of all, because of its pervasiveness, becomes the triggering factor that modifies and interrupts the intersubjectivity between the two protagonists and the characters. This is perfectly demonstrated in the way in which the cultural environment is presented to Pecola and Bride by their families. While Winnicott talks about the importance of introducing the world to the child in small doses in order to avoid a traumatic experience (*The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* 69), Morrison displays how both the Breedlove and the Bridewell families introduce the world to Pecola and Bride in the wrong way, in the same painfully way they had learnt the world. Dosing the world does not mean that the facilitators have to deny the child something in order to protect him. It is not a matter of clamping down reality, but of relating to the idea that “If a little girl wants to fly we do not just say ‘Children don't fly’. Instead of that we pick her up and carry her around above our heads and put her on top of the cupboard, so that she feels she has flown like a bird to her nest” (*The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* 70-71). This means that the parent-filter or facilitator has to guide the child into the world allowing a sense of imagination and a gradual passage from illusion and disillusion. A process that neither Bride nor Pecola have experienced since their parents have never let them imagine the reality as a child should do. Their parents have cruelly pushed them experiencing a world of racism and hate without acting like filters or taking care of them by sustaining their identities or by teaching how to be strong and how to deal with this harsh reality.

The same attention is directed to what Winnicott defines as “cultural experience” which is an extension of the transitional phenomena and the activity of play (*Playing and Reality* 133). The cultural experience occurs in “the potential space between the individual and the environment” (*Playing and Reality* 135) and it includes the cultural aspects part of the environment where the self lives such as society, traditions, costume and myths; all those elements that belong to the reality the child gradually interacts with thanks to environmental

factors such as the mother role (*Playing and Reality* 138-39). Considering the two novels and the fact that both protagonists are African American, it is clear that reality is not given in small doses to the child-protagonists and the cultural experience does not occur gradually or by posing a good filter. From the very beginning of her existence, Pecola is covered under the same mantle of ugliness of his family without giving any way of escaping the oppression of the beauty standards. Bride is raised in a household where her mother teaches her that the world belongs to the White people who are just letting them, Black people, live; her life is only about surviving and never concerning about her identity and self-love. The cultural elements are forced on them without filter, without the possibility to choose or to reject them or even to assimilate in a healthy and gradual approach. However, in these two narratives, Morrison wants to emphasize that Pecola and Bride cannot avoid this kind of cultural experience because the people they interact with - particularly their families - have experienced the cultural environment in the same way. Pecola surrenders to the White standards and goes under the mantle of ugliness because Cholly, Pauline, and Sammy wear it, and nobody has ever told them she could act differently. Bride sets the skin color as the center of her life because Sweetness has taught her the same principle about the crucial role of skin color that is deep-rooted in her identity.

Besides Winnicott's neuropsychiatric point of view on the environmental factors in a child's development, African American Studies have pointed out the importance of ensuring a strong sense of self into the African American children's development. In her *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, Andrea O'Reilly writes about the view on motherhood as a sort of social activism in which the mother by taking care of her child is creating a safe space from the discriminating world with the aim to strengthen the empowerment in African American children. The mother-role is not the only one responsible of the child, but, as bell hook emphasizes, it is the whole homeplace that becomes a safe

space where “black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination ... [a place where they] had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture [their] spirits” (qtd. in O’Reilly 11). An African American child requires a strong act of nurturance in a racist and oppressive culture. Living in a not-facilitating environment should urge the family and those who take care of him to become a filter, a reliable adapter in his experiencing of the world and its culture. Pecola and Bride live in an environment shaped by the racial system, and which has originated attitudes, mindset and social constructions hard to remove. Yet, since their birth they are immediately identified as the Other, the unlovable, too different, and not familiar. The state of Otherness is imposed on them without giving them the chance not to be considered in these terms. They are born and soon recognized as the Other, persuading them to own and identify only with this definition: they end up asserting that they are the Other.

Winnicott calls this phenomenon the Mirror Effect: the child sees in the eyes of the mother and father an image of himself that he identifies with, and is influenced by, throughout the development (*Playing and Reality* 152). This image, however, is not supposed to be fixed and continuous in the life of the child because, if the child follows a healthy development and positively experiences the reality, he realizes that there is not only one image to identify with but multiple identifications he can own and add to his identity (*Playing and Reality* 158). Therefore, a mirror effect badly elaborated brings the consequence that the child will keep on identifying with the original reflected image, even when he interacts with the reality outside the family unit. Moreover, when the child reflects with a negative image, he will develop a low self-esteem which can get worse if the environment he interacts with is hostile. By moving in a not-facilitating environment, the child is not able to ignore the judgements of the others, they become actually important for him because it is only through the eyes of the others that he recognizes to be worthy. For instance, by internalizing the

standards of beauty and by identifying herself (like the rest of her family) as ugly and unworthy, Pecola thinks that the only way to escape this condition is to change the color of her eyes; it is the only way to remove the image she reflects with and to be accepted by the rest of the community. Similarly, Bride wants to demonstrate that her mother is wrong about the horrors of being too dark, so she keeps on conforming to everything that is white or recalls an idea of whiteness because this is the only way to be visible: changing her name from Lula Ann Bridewell to Lula Ann to Ann Bride, finally, to Bride and by choosing a total white look. Since the mirror effect originates in the family and it has always been a distorted reflection, the child-characters are not able to preserve and raise their true self. Looking into that mirror they accept what they see and without any support inside and outside the family, it becomes increasingly difficult to detach from that reflected image or replacing it with a new one. The absence of any support is destructive as we can see in the relationship between Pecola and the community she is supposed to be protected by: this latter, on the contrary, keeps on reflecting the same distorted unworthy image that she has been labeled with.

The sense of community is a reality that has always been important for African American people, it is a life-support system where a child finds a strong reliance and a source for his self-esteem; a support which he can benefit from (Crosson-Tower 28). In the interview with Camille O. Cosby, Toni Morrison explains that when she was a child in Lorain, the role of community was fundamental in her process of growing up and in her sense of identity. The community was an extension of her family and, as a child, she had always felt to be part of it, a place where she could feel safe:

anybody on the street could correct you. I remember putting on some lipstick when I was fourteen and some woman came up to me and wiped it off ... she was in the neighborhood, and so I knew her, but I didn't say 'What are you doing? Don't touch me.' I just let her take it off and shake her finger at me and

send me home ... They were safety to me ... I always looked at them as safe (78-79).

The community is then an environment which takes care of the weakest and acts to protect them, especially children. Conversely, the community where Pecola moves is quite different, it displays negative attitudes and takes part in the ruin of the child by expanding the mirror-effect that keeps hunting her. First by gossiping and setting an atmosphere of judgements against the entire Breedlove family. Second, by demonstrating their refusal to interact with Pecola as it is perfectly shown in the two characters who symbolize two kinds of racial hate. On the one hand, Mr. Yacobowski, a white immigrant owner of a shop, who despises Pecola just because she is black. On the other hand, Geraldine, an African American woman, who displays Colorism and hates Pecola because of the darker color of her skin.

Mr. Yacobowski's gaze, in fact, states both dominance and rejection, he is characterized by blindness, "his inability to 'see' Pecola" (Ryan 154):

He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see ... She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness ... she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes ... She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness ... it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edge with distaste in white eyes. (*The Bluest Eye* 46-47).

He even hesitates to take her money "not wanting to touch her hand" (47). His choice of avoiding physical contact and sight determines another destructive act against the child who, despite her young age, knows and recognizes the sense of disgust in his gaze and in his way of treating her as if she were not a human being, not even worthy to be considered such, due to the color of her skin.

Yet, the same kind of hate finds a source in the black community as well, by discriminating in the name of Colorism as Geraldine does. Before describing the harsh scene between Geraldine, Pecola, Junior and the cat, the narrator takes time introducing this character. We as readers receive Geraldine's backstory: learning how she has been raised, the principles she has been taught to look up to and how she set her life in Lorain with her husband and son, especially, how she has raised Junior, readers understand why, at the end of her section, she tells Pecola: "'Get out,' ... 'You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house'" (90). Through Geraldine, it is explained why Colorism is another painful issue for the African American community. In a world shaped by White dominance, a black man or woman struggle to reach a higher social level, and from this perspective, the quantity, so to speak, of whiteness is what can make a person closer to the beauty standards and to the status of a white person. Colorism is, thus, a form of intra-group stratification which "would likely not exist without the privileging of whiteness in terms of phenotype, aesthetics, and culture" (Hunter 175-176). Being recognized as a white man or woman gives privilege, respect and a superior social status; having a lighter skin, as Sweetness and Geraldine, is something that raises you above the rest of the community and, according to both of them, Colorism is the only way to protect one's own dignity.

In this sense, Geraldine is presented as a brown woman raised in a town where black people works to "muffle the negative status" attached to their Blackness "by emphasizing their superior class position" (Hill Collins 94) and get closer to the social position covered by white people. She comes from an idyllic place where "These sugar-brown Mobile girls move through the streets without a stir" (*The Bluest Eye* 80). Women like her are impeccable and scented, they follow the beauty White standards by "worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair" (81) and by straightening them with Dixie Peach (80). They are also impeccable in the way of behaving, they never swear drink or smoke, and "they still call sex 'nookey'" (80).

They obviously go to Church and sing in the choir; they receive an education in “how to do the white’s man’s work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul” (81). Their life is then lived with the purpose of removing any traces of “funkiness”, of African American heritage. They grow up with the only aim to conform to white standards, adapting to what is considered good-manners and high-morals: “Whenever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave” (81). In her marriage Geraldine has sex just because it is required for procreating another human being: she does not find it enjoyable or as an act of profound intimacy with her husband. It is a moment that annoys her because it requires spending time and energies in undressing or worrying about the sweating, so she fakes it and wait the ends with relief (83).

While Geraldine commits to the White standards and performs them, the Breedlove family acts in the opposite way: they live in a miserable house, they do not limit their emotions, but they express them through physical and verbal violence; sex is not a taboo and the parents have it in the only bedroom the whole family shares without the preoccupation that kids could hear or see. The only aspects that the families have in common is the emotional neglect that both Pecola and Junior receive. Geraldine, in fact, meets any physical needs of her son but she lacks empathy and emotional connection which contributes to Junior’s becoming a bully. At the same time, she raises him by teaching her principles; she imposes on Junior the racial system based on the idea of

difference between colored people and niggers ... Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as

possible to avoid any suggestion of wool ... In winter his mother put Jergens Lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned, it was possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant. (85)

As a result, by teaching such a distorted point of view to her son, Geraldine contributes to aggravate Pecola's reflected self-image. When Geraldine finds Pecola in her house she cannot control her disgust, the little girl represents everything that she associates with poverty, disorder and despair, the reality she has always tried to escape (Gillespie 50). In the eyes of the little girl, the violent cat scene becomes another proof of the fact she is unloved and not accepted by the community. She is, in fact, in a state of "in between and outside"; Colorism and white supremacy hurl against Pecola and so she ends up in a double alienation from the black community (Geraldine) and the white one (Mr. Yacobowski). She moves between the African American community and the White community, but she is kept outside from both.

Bride does not experience the same kind of alienation. She lives in a bigger city where she does not belong to any community, she just finds herself interacting with people in the environment. During her childhood it has always been just her and her mother living in a building whose owner is the terrible Mr. Leigh. This man is the first one who verbally attacks her when she witnesses his abuse on a child. Once a woman, she creates her own life-support system with Brooklyn and Booker, but it cannot be considered as a community, especially because each of them is never sincere with one another but lives his/her own pain alone.

Another context that Bride interacts with is the school where, as she describes in one of her sections, she experiences racial hate: "They treated me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper. I didn't complain to the teacher ... I let the name-calling, the

bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins, with no antibiotic available.” (*God Help the Child* 56-57). Just like Pecola with Mr. Yacobowski, Bride recognizes the reason why the students insult her, but at the same time she does not have “antibiotic available”, meaning that she is powerless, so deeply hurt and diminished by the self-loathing, self-contempt image rooted in her identity that she is not able to react. A scene that can be related to the mirror effect which, as we notice, does not only concern adults but the youngest people too. In the same manner, Pecola finds rejection at school where she is mocked as a joke: “when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say. ‘Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!’ and never fails to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused” (*The Bluest Eye* 44).

In conclusion, the hostile cultural environment that surrounds the two protagonists is a combination of racial prejudices and white supremacy which set a series of attitudes and perspectives that ends in being reflected in the small context where Pecola and Bride move: the community, their schools, the people they interact with and, most of all, in their families where the echo of racial hate is stronger than ever. From the point of view of Pecola and Bride, what exists outside their houses is an extension of the hostile and toxic environment they both experience with their families. The people they interact with, part or not of a community, display actions, gazes and insults which do not give any way of escaping from the mirror effect imposed on them. These people embody the hurtful environmental elements because they are part of their identities as well, thus, they are unable to produce a different mirror effect for the two child-protagonists. Every act that Pecola and Bride experience provokes a loss in the healthy development of their identities. Using Winnicott’s terminology during their childhood they only gather the “not-me” units, because what the environments keep on teaching them is who they are not, without giving them a chance to establish who

they are as well as to strengthen their self-esteem and their recognition of being worthy. Since their experience is affected by negative environmental factors, their development is not linear, but has several fractures which make them *interrupted* children unable to grow. Pecola and Bride share a painful childhood that create profound wounds in their identity, a childhood that instead of giving them precious memories, acts of love, strength and self-esteem, it has deprived them of such support. As children, they have first learnt self-loathing and isolation before even being able to acknowledge their own identity. In the next chapter with the support of other theories by Winnicott, it will be explained how all these environmental factors affect the two protagonists, in which kind of interrupted girls they turn into. They are children robbed of their own childhood, defenseless and vulnerable; they are both interrupted children, but their developments are interrupted in two different ways that share some aspects but result in different outcomes.

Chapter 3

The *Interrupted* Children Pecola and Bride: False Self, Dissociation and Regression

3.1 Process of Disintegration and False Self: Systems of Self-Defence

In his essay “Ego Integration in Child Development” (1962), Winnicott explains that the ego of a child is “that part of the growing human personality that tends, under suitable conditions, to become integrated into a unit” (56) necessary for the child’s development and understanding of the “I”, then of “I am, I exist, I gather experiences” as well as the acknowledgment of the “not-me” (61). This integration is a process that presents an increasing complexity given the fact that it depends on a series of environmental factors – as we have already noticed: the good-enough mother and the facilitating environment – and how the child deals with them. Consequently, if the child experiences a failed process, like Pecola and Bride, the ego results defective because it has not integrated, and it does not allow the development. This results, according to Winnicott, in

a reaction of the infant, and this reaction cuts across the going-on-being. If reacting that is disruptive of going-on-being recurs persistently it sets going a pattern of fragmentation of being. The infant whose pattern is one of fragmentation of the line of continuity of being has a developmental task that is, almost from the beginning, loaded in the direction of psychopathology. (60-61)

The consequences in the child’s development could indeed be severely crippling, ranging from infantile Schizophrenia or Autism to latent Schizophrenia, to False Self-Defence, and to Schizoid personality (58-59). We may state that in these conditions the child undergoes an opposite process that could be called “disintegration”, but Winnicott explains

that “[t]his is only partly true” because “[t]he opposite, initially, requires a word like unintegration” (61). Disintegration, in fact, is a process more complex than the simple decay of units: it describes “a sophisticated *defence*, a defence that is an active production of chaos in defence against unintegration in the absence of maternal ego-support, that is, against the unthinkable or archaic anxiety that results from failure of holding in the stage of absolute dependence” (61). In other words, due to the lack of support by the environmental factors, the child finds himself unable to “sum” or even create his own units, he is at a stage of what Winnicott defines as unintegration due to his “ignorance” on how to sum properly the units, the subsequent reaction is the process of disintegration as a “sophisticated arrangement of defences”, a new organization of the self whose object is to ensure the development of the child and, at the same time, avoid the repetition of another process of disintegration (“The Concept of a Healthy Individual” 10).

Pecola and Bride are children whose processes of integration have never been supported since both the good-enough mother and the facilitating environments fail in their respective functions. In addition, they experience abuses on the emotional and physical level which cause a further break in their life’s continuity. The trauma, in fact, also requires an organization of defences for the self against the repetition of the “acute confusional state” that derives from it (*Playing and Reality* 131). Winnicott explains that the responses to a defective integration and experiences of trauma lies, again, in the process of disintegration. The arrangement of defences, obviously, changes depending on the child. As the American Academy of Pediatrics state in their *Medical Evaluation of Child Sexual Abuse* (2019) – which is also addressed to any kind of abuses: “There is no recognized universal set of responses” in the children’s experiences of abuses and maltreatment, they vary depending on the nature of the trauma and the individual psychological adaptation (11). What it is not possible to escape is the fact that a trauma indeed provokes a fragmentation in the identity of

the child and “forces a separation from the self” (Greenberg 322). Thus, considering the effects caused by the trauma and by the inefficiency of the not-good-enough mothers and not-facilitating environments, the two children-protagonists display an interrupted development. They both experience a process of disintegration which brings them to the erection of a defence system called the False Self which is opposed to what is called the True Self.

The “sum” of all the units that the child gathers during his development generates, as we have already pointed out, the “I am” of the child which includes the child as a whole, from his inner world (like his personality), to his way of socializing with the outside world: it is the child’s True Self. Winnicott perfectly explains this concept in his essay “Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self” (1960) by highlighting that the strength of the True Self is directly proportional to the strength given to the child by the mother: if she is not good-enough, she fails her function, and she is not able to implement the child’s self, that is to say, the development will on the contrary produce a False Self of the child (145). This False Self does not remove the True one, it instead has a “defensive function” which is “to hide and protect the True Self” through a new organization (142). The False Self can be as real as the True one that “observers tend to think is the real person” (142), in fact, through the False Self the child “builds up a false set of relationships, and by means of introjections even attains a show of being real” (146). The False Self is, then, an unconscious way of coping with the reality where the child exists. A defensive organization that the child creates in order to protect the True Self that “has been traumatized and it must never be found and wounded again” (“The Concept of a Healthy Individual” 11).

Just as Winnicott places the good-enough mothering as the responsible for the establishment of the child’s True Self, O’Reilly explains that in Toni Morrison’s novels,

children who do not receive the preservation, nurturance, and cultural bearing of motherwork never develop the authentic selfhood [the True Self] ... and thus grow to be psychologically wounded as adults. Never having been loved – protected, nurtured, and sustained through cultural bearing – by their mothers, unmothered children never learn how to love themselves. Without this self-love, the “me” of which Morrison speaks is lost, forgotten, or “put to sleep. (40)

Morrison’s ideas, in this sense, coincide with Winnicott’s theories: the child’s identity needs the support of the mother and her sense of caring, most of all, the child needs a basic element such as love. “Mothers”, Morrison emphasizes, must “take their daughters in their arms and hold them and say, you are just fine the way you are” (qtd. in O’Reilly 33), the child’s self can follow a healthy development if only he moves “from motherlove to selflove to selfhood” (O’Reilly 33). Yet, Pecola and Bride do not share this experience. They live surrounded by violence as well as by the absence of empathy on their mothers’ parts. This same violent and unemphatic environment is what they find in their broader community. In the article “Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*” (2011), the author claims that in such environment where these girls and children characters receive emotional abuse, the outcomes can be of two kinds: they either accept and believe in their ugliness and their unworthiness or they “fight back as aggressively as possible to maintain a positive self-image” (28). Pecola undoubtedly belongs to the first group, while Bride could be included in the second one. Both, however, display the construction of a False Self as a choice to escape from their reality and cope with the pain they experience. Since they have lost the reliability first in the environmental factors and then in themselves, the only way to survive is to build an alternative reality, an alternative Self. Pecola takes refuge in the idea that having blue eyes she will be finally loved

and be visible and, by totally devoting to this False Self, she will endure a dramatic ending. Bride, on her part, shows her determination in maintaining a positive self-image, but it demonstrates to be just an illusion reflected by the False Self. In her narration she shows the hard work behind the establishment and refinement of her False Self which required years of changing, secrets and lies. She presents herself as a woman living the best of her life: a self-made woman with a high sense of fashion, with a successful career, with trustful friends and a beautiful boyfriend. Still, she is displaying her False Self, while her True Self is hidden under the glamorous look she keeps on flaunting. By echoing the previously quoted words by Morrison, Pecola loses her “me” through the obsession with the blue eyes, while Bride “put[s] to sleep” her own.

As a result, their False Selves define how their developments occur after they reach the state of interruption due to the several breakings provoked by hostile environmental factors. Now interrupted, they need to detach from their pain as soon as possible. Yet, the False Self, even if it is designed in detail, does not allow a healthy development and the True Self keeps being hurt, hidden, and interrupted. Pecola and Bride experience the False Self in two different ways; each of them finds herself in a fight between False and True Self. In fact, once the defensive system – which they have started with the process of disintegration – collapses, the True Self finds its way to the surface and the child or the adult, like in the case of Bride, must react. It is in this reaction that Bride and Pecola differ: on the one hand, Pecola ends in the total embracing of her False Self through the psychological state of Dissociation; on the other hand, Bride lives the total collapse of her False Self through a gradual Regression.

3.2 The Progressive Dissociation of Pecola

As previously stated, the novel *The Bluest Eye* opens with three prologues. The first one is the Dick and Jane's obsessive refrain, the second one is the voice of the now adult narrator Claudia and the third one is the actual beginning of the novel and the events. The second prologue immediately addresses the Autumn after the events; in the following prologue, we are informed about the past seasons and the continuous interferences and hostile environmental factors that have gradually stunned the True Self of the vulnerable and weak child-protagonist. It is a cyclic narration that begins and ends with the interruption of Pecola, and it is a cycle that represents Pecola's search of validation, sadly, without a positive outcome. Even in the section set in Spring – usually a season that recalls rebirth and lightness – Pecola experiences the worst trauma: Pauline's violent reaction at the Fisher's house, Cholly's rape, and the poisoning of the dog. Spring is the section that encloses the three final hits which break into pieces Pecola's self. A self that has been mistreated everywhere, that has never been able to find a place to be nurtured and elevated. A self which has experienced the burden of the White standards, these unwritten laws that define the life of an African American child and posed as a shadow that keeps on hunting her and affecting her development, resulting in a detachment from her own body. Winnicott explains that the process of integration is equally important for the self as well as for the body in which the self resides ("Primitive Emotional Development" 63). By repudiating her image, she hurts her inner world; rather than finding the beauty in her body, she persists in looking through the distorted image presented by the mirror effect. Pecola has so deeply rooted and internalized the White standards that she loses contact with her own body and, obviously, her own self. The same beauty standards, that she envies and notices in the Hollywood icon Shirley Temple, deny her uniqueness and identity, and result in a denial of her selfhood. She gets her

ugliness from everywhere and this forces her to hide and take a seat in the invisibility and absence, “which in turn becomes her only mode of presence” (LaVon Walther 777).

These “[e]nvironmental disturbances distorting the emotional development”, explains Winnicott, “produce distortions of the personality” and distortions of the child’s perception of the reality (“Delinquency as a Sign of Hope” 29). As evidence, Pecola thinks that the only way to feel accepted and loved is to get blue eyes. The blue eyes can help her changing the world that surrounds her, the pretty blue eyes can cancel all the ugliness and pain in her life:

As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them. Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. (*The Bluest Eye* 43)

Unfortunately, there is nobody to support Pecola or to comfort her and to take care of her being hurt. Even her mother, who should take care of her, finds an alternative reality where to escape: the movie theatre and religion. In the same manner that Pauline adjusts her hair to look like Jean Harlow and goes to the cinema where everything is perfect and beautiful with “[w]hite men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses” (*The Bluest Eye* 121), Pecola needs the blue eyes as a way to escape. This brings her to organize a False Self, the system of defense protecting her True Self broken by self-loathing and self-contempt. The False Self derives from her strong conviction that the blue eyes are the only way of coping with the reality: “if those eyes of hers 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’” (44). It seems the only choice for Pecola; in a reality where she is invisible, it is impossible for her to recognize

her beauty, she is only able to see through the eyes of other people, therefore, she waits for the miracle of the blue eyes. In the interview with Bill Moyers in 1990, Morrison explains that for Pecola the only choice to survive, as an abused child, is to “escape into fantasy, into madness” where she can be the pretty child with blue eyes that everybody loves (33).

Interestingly, Claudia, who is a black child too and experiences the same cultural environment of Pecola, is far from this obsession of conforming to the beauty standards. In fact, while Pecola is unable to criticize the White standards, but, on the contrary, she is attracted by them ending in damaging her self-esteem, Claudia reacts to them with anger as we can see in the scene about Shirley Temple when Pecola is expressing her admiration while Claudia expresses her hatred toward the young actress:

I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels. So I said, 'I like Jane Withers.' (*The Bluest Eye* 17)

Likewise, the same attitude is also visible with the doll that Claudia refuses as a Christmas gift: she just wants to dismember and “see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (*The Bluest Eye* 18). Moreover, the difference between Claudia and Pecola is clear in their interaction with the beautiful “high-yellow” classmate Maureen Peal. When this last one starts asking inappropriate questions to Pecola, she cannot assert herself but “tucked her head in – a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the

neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears” (*The Bluest Eye* 70). Instead, Claudia is able to react at Maureen’s meanness and, together with her sister Freida, tired and irritated by the beautiful – White standards acceptable – appearance of Maureen, they decide to point out her flaws as a way “to restore [their] equilibrium” (*The Bluest Eye* 61) and restore the power in themselves, avoiding a devaluation of their identities. Unquestionably, the difference between Pecola and Claudia stands in their life support system, in their environmental factors. Claudia cannot end in a state of interruption because she is part of a loving family where her father always protects her and her sister – such as in the scene of Mr. Henry – and her mother, although strict, takes care of her daughters with love and affection. Besides, in the cultural environment, even if it is the same experienced by Pecola, Claudia and her sister receive a filter which helps them gradually adapting to the reality outside their home and at the same time coexist with the pain inflicted by the White standards. It is, according to Morrison’s maternal standpoint, the “preservative love ... an act of resistance [that] ... keeps children alive and well in a world that is at best indifferent to, and at worst hostile to, the survival of black children” (O’Reilly 124). In the discourse of True Self and False Self, thanks to a good-enough mothering and the experience of a facilitating environment, Claudia is able to display her True Self. She and her sister Freida are strong enough to assert their identities and experience the world without hiding. On the contrary, Pecola is weak, with a strong sense of shame and self-loathing that encourage her miserable state and lead her toward the progressive psychological deterioration.

Despite her strong attachment to the illusion of the blue eyes, Pecola does not become immune from the constellation of trauma in her life’s experience which becomes a pattern that repeats throughout her entire narration (Bouson 209). In addition, her obsessive searching to be finally accepted goes along with the needs of filling another enormous absence in her development: love and caring. She longs to be loved, but, at the end, the only

love she receives is horrendous and immoral in the form of rape committed by Cholly. Initially, Cholly feels a sequence of emotion “revulsion, guilt, pity, then love” (*The Bluest Eye* 159), but then the feeling changes into an impulse of violence because he is bothered by the whipped look on her face. The narrator emphasizes “If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him – the love would move him to fury” (*The Bluest Eye* 159). Cholly is so folded in himself, in his own pain and wounded self that is unable to perform fatherhood. Then, “It was such a small and simple gesture” that filled him “with a wondering softness” (*The Bluest Eye* 160) and pushed by a mixture of alcohol and an intensification of his wife’s sweetest memories, Cholly rapes his own daughter and then leaves her unconscious on the kitchen’s floor. It is in this scene that Morrison encloses the tragic meaning of Pecola’s desperate search for love. In its own way, it was love according to Cholly,

But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover’s inward eye. (*The Bluest Eye* 204)

It is necessary to highlight the rape scene because it is on that Saturday afternoon that Pecola totally ends her childhood. Actually, she first crosses the border between childhood and girlhood when she “ministratin” (*The Bluest Eye* 25), and it is in this scene that she discovers that now she can have a baby but, says Freida “somebody has to love you” (30). Pecola significantly closes that section of the novel by asking “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” (30), and then, pages later, Pecola receives an

answer about love, unfortunately the wrong one. Her being a child is thus “frozen” and “neutralized” with an act of love by the hands of a “dangerously free” man (*The Bluest Eye* 157), and with this final blow her development ends totally interrupted. The incest leaves Pecola profoundly wounded in her body with the pregnancy and later loss of her father’s child, and in her mind with a psychological trauma and, on the top of that, it also marks her with a social stigma that destroys her completely.

The American Academy of Pediatrics claims that one of the effects on mental health visible in a child victim of sexual abuse is a display of interpersonal difficulties which are “[a]ssociated with the child’s view of himself or herself after the abuse and his or her ability to establish trusting relationships” (Finkel and Giardino 12-13) as well as the strengthening of low self-esteem and sense of guilt (Geib 4-5). Pecola after the rape is pregnant, desperate, and totally alienated from the rest of the community. This state brings her at the door of Soaphead Church, the man that (according to his card advertising) has the capacities to solve any issue from bad luck to marriage problems and to health conditions; he is the last chance for Pecola to be different and to receive her yearned blue eyes. Once she unintentionally kills the dog, as Soaphead promises, she finally receives her blue eyes. Soaphead is the character that commits the last hurtful act against Pecola by letting her witness the scaring death of the dog and by sentencing her to a dramatic ending: “I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue . . . 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 so to do” (*The Bluest Eye* 180).

These last words by Soaphead expresses exactly the ending of Pecola: she is the only one who can see her blue eyes. Her struggle has been to find a place in the community, to be finally accepted. Afterward all the trauma experienced the only place where she is able to exist is in herself together with her False Self – the Pecola with the blue eyes. In other words,

Pecola ends in a state of Dissociation, a coping mechanism displayed when someone feels threatened and which is accompanied by a strong feeling of confusion, flashbacks, nightmares, denial, as well as repressed memories (Sharpe 35). At the end of the novel, we find a Pecola who is split, dissociated from her True Self and coexisting with the False one. The situation is emblematically demonstrated by her inner dialogue. It is at this point of dissociation that, as Winnicott may explain, the process of integration arrests and it ends incomplete. *The Bluest Eye* ends with an interrupted Pecola talking by herself: a little girl whose childhood has been abruptly and violently ended. A child to whom neither choices of elevating nor help of support has been given. In this sense, Pecola stands at her interrupted stage, stuck in the dialogue between her two Selves where memories of her experienced sufferance and the joy for her new blue eyes coexist and sometimes prevails one on the other: “You’re just jealous. *I am not*. You are. You wish you had them ... No. Don’t go. What do you want to do? *We could go outside and play, I guess ...* Are they really nice? *Yes. Very nice.* Just “very nice”? *Really, truly, very nice.* Really, truly, bluey nice? *Oh, God. You are crazy. I am not!* (*The Bluest Eye* 192).

The conversation between her two Selves demonstrates the dissociation that has occurred in her mind. The italics helps us understand that there are two Pecola talking one to the other, but it is not clear which one is the new False Self with the pretty blue eyes, and which one is the old traumatized True Self. In her state of Dissociation, the line of separation between the two selves has been erased, now they both coexist in Pecola’s mind. She organizes her inner system by building the False Self and embracing the True Self, mixing them so intensely that we – Pecola as well – are not able to distinguish the False one from the True one. From her conversation we understand that she has lost every real contact with the outside world, she knows that anybody talks with her, but her lack of sense of reality suggests that it is due to their jealousy for her blue eyes: Mrs. Breedlove and the rest of the community

“They all try to pretend they don’t see them. Isn’t that funny?” (*The Bluest Eye* 193). She also uses the jealousy of her classmates to justify her dropping out of school, but it is her mother who forces her to do it because she is pregnant. In this confusional state we understand that a part of her denies the rape by Cholly, but the other self reveals that it happened another time on the couch, and so keeps on asking questions as if one wants to cope with the trauma by expressing the emotional status, and the other does not want to talk about it but keeps on repressing the memory. Her dissociation and the cohabitation with both selves do not satisfy her obsession for the blue eyes, it is still an obsession which constantly returns in the dialogue, especially when she does not want to deal with the past trauma: “What? What will we talk about? *Why, your eyes.* Oh, yes. My eyes. My blue eyes. Let me look again” (*The Bluest Eye* 199). Her obsession cannot be appeased because she is still the weak child, she does not feel empowered by the illusion of owning the blue eyes. She is so used to unceasingly compare herself to the standards and to feel uneasy and inferior for her physical appearance that now she is afraid that her eyes are not blue enough: “But suppose my eyes aren’t blue enough? *Blue enough for what?* Blue enough for...I don’t know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough...for you!” (201). Her eyes could not be blue enough for the White standards and the False Self is, in part, a product of the pain provoked by beauty standards. Therefore, not being able to satisfy that self means not being up to White standards.

The reorganization of the self, the process of disintegration, started as an idea, a desire for blue eyes as if they were a remedy for an illness. Then from a little idea it became an obsession, a pray and, lastly, a miracle. Pecola cannot realize that everything is just an illusion because no one, neither in the family nor in the community, comes to rescue her. She is left by herself isolated from everybody. Yet, she is not alone because she is with her “real friend” (194): “How come? *How come what?* How come you don’t talk to anybody? *I talk to you.* Besides me. *I don’t like anybody besides you*” (195), in the end she finds comfort just

talking with herself because she knows that the other self will always be “*Right before [her] very eyes*” (202).

At the eyes of the others, she becomes visible but “[g]rown people looked away” and “children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright” (*The Bluest Eye* 202), despite her tragic outcome, she is still seen as a joke. Claudia explains how the life of the Breedlove family continued after the Dissociation of Pecola, and she gives us the confirmation that Pecola has never succeed in overcoming her interrupted stage, she is stuck in an unintegrated development, unable “to sum the units” of her identity and to build one strong True Self. Claudia says that she still sees Pecola searching in the garbage looking for “The thing we assassinated” (204). Probably, Pecola is looking for her True Self, her self-worthiness, but she is still looking for it in the ugliness, in the garbage, unable to even think that it could be found in a place of beauty, as if “the cloak of ugliness” keeps on covering her and erasing any possibility of healing from the interruption and of becoming one whole individual.

3.3 The Regression of Bride

The Bluest Eye is a journey in the gradual destruction of Pecola, ending with her reaching the final stage: the total interruption and arrest of her psychological development. Almost fifty years later, *God Help the Child* narrates the story of Bride, a young woman, who embarks on a journey forced by the necessity of dealing with the past, or rather, of dealing with her inner interrupted child. “Inner” because she actually grew up, but the wounds from her past are still there, ready to be faced and healed. This novel is, therefore, about childhood wounds that leave a lasting mark even into adulthood, while *The Bluest Eye* is a novel entirely focused on Pecola’s childhood and her becoming a woman is only narrated briefly at the end. In the case of Bride, we meet her as a woman and, pages by pages, we understand more about her childhood. She is, in fact, a child victim of emotional abuse committed by her mother Sweetness. Abuses in the form of rejection, isolation and emotional neglecting which do not leave “permanent physical scars”, but “emotional scars throughout the victim’s life” (McCabe and Murphy 74). Similarly to Pecola, during her childhood, Bride is hunted by the image reflected by the mirror-effect set by her mother, an image which diminishes Bride, makes her unworthy, ugly and unlovable. An image charged with negative and hurtful ideas all related to the color of her skin: the element that, according to Sweetness, is the unique trait that characterizes her daughter. The environment where she grows up is defined by her mother teaching her that not being enough white is an obstacle, something that precludes the possibility to live a happy life. Like many victims of emotional abuse, once they grow older, they often distance themselves from the abuser (McCabe and Murphy 61) and so does Bride with Sweetness. Detaching from her mother is a way to escape the mirror-effect. However, although Bride starts visiting Sweetness less and less, it is clear that the image of the mirror effect is still looming over her. For this reason, she creates a False Self, a new way to identify

herself; in denial of the mirror effect, she creates a brand-new image: from Lula Ann Bridewell she changed into Bride.

It may be possible claiming that Bride, in contrast to Pecola, builds her False Self on her outer self, while Pecola on her inside her. In the sense that Bride and all the elements that characterize her (beauty, career, friends, and boyfriend) makes her False Self a real person who interacts with the real world. Bride's False Self is a system of defense for the True Self concealed underneath, that is Lula Ann, the inner interrupted child. Pecola, instead, coexists with her False Self in her mind, in her state of dissociation. Besides, Pecola's False Self – the child with the pretty blue eyes – is not visible for the other people, no one interacts with it except Pecola. Bride's False Self is more detailed, for years it has been designed with such care and attention that it demonstrates how much the protagonist really wants to escape from her past and inner child. Even when she was a child, she attempted to build a False Self, but in the form of the “perfect child”, not an unusual response for a child victim of neglect (McCabe and Murphy 90-91). Lula Ann is desperate for adult attention and, most of all, for an act of love and caring. This occurs after Sweetness forces her daughter to testify against Sofia Huxley falsely accused of sexual abuse toward children. Significantly, Sweetness expresses love and affection after Bride lies during her testimony. Hence, this act, which is supposed to be positive, loses its essence of love and affection, and changes into a harmful gesture. By telling a lie, Bride can experience a loving mothering which, as we will see later, will cost her enormously once she becomes a young woman:

I glanced at Sweetness; she was smiling like I've never seen her smile before – with mouth and eyes. And that wasn't all. Outside the courtroom all the mothers smiled at me, and two actually touched and hugged me ... Best of all was Sweetness. As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand, my hand. She never did that before and it surprised me as much as it pleased

me because I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch. I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated – bed without supper, lock me in my room – but her screaming at me was the worst. When fear rules, obedience is the only survival choice. And I was good at it. I behaved and behaved and behaved. Frightened as I was to appear in court, I did what the teacher-psychologists expected of me. Brilliantly, I know, because after the trial Sweetness was kind of motherlike. (*God Help the Child* 31-32)

Bride longs for a loving touch from her mother, so she behaves properly, performing the “perfect child” and, later, by agreeing on telling a lie against Sofia. For Sweetness the trial is a chance to be considered at the same level of other parents, without the shaming feeling of a black daughter. For the first time, the color of Bride's skin is not a threat, it is something to be proud of because, even though her child is black, she succeeds in sending to prison a white person, in her opinion it is something extraordinary. In her section, Sweetness narrates about the trial from her point of view, and she demonstrates how her memory of that day is deeply different from the one narrated by Bride in her section. Sweetness is extremely sure that it is an act of good mothering and what Bride does is something to be proud of:

But the lessons I taught her paid off because in the end she made me proud as a peacock ... Young as she was, she behaved like a grown-up on the witness stand – so calm and sure of herself ... I was nervous thinking she would stumble getting up to the stand, or stutter, or forget what the psychologists said and put me to shame ... After Lula Ann's performance in that court and on the

stand I was so proud of her, we walked the streets hand in hand. It's not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites. I wanted her to know how pleased I was so I had her ears pierced and bought her a pair of earrings – tiny gold hoops. (*God Help the Child* 41-43)

From these memories, we understand that Bride is the product of childhood trauma, a new identity derived from her process of disintegration. By growing up she learns how to master the art of reinvention, a decision which naturally comes from her need of detaching from the past, from that childhood in which her own mother denies acts of affection and who praises her only when she tells a lie. Becoming Bride is a mechanism of coping with pain and reality. Winnicott explains that a development determined by a good enough mother paves the way for the establishment of the True Self, but if she is not good enough “the infant lives, but lives falsely” (“Ego Distortions in Terms of True and False Self” 146). Lula Ann is the hurt True Self which has been covered and well-hidden, and above it a new identity has been built, the False Self Bride. A gradual process which begins years before and progressively erases bits and pieces of Lula Ann Bridewell:

Lula Ann Bridewell is no longer available and she was never a woman. Lula Ann was a sixteen-year-old-me who dropped that dumb countryfied name as soon as I left high school. I was Ann Bride for two years until I interviewed for a sales job at Sylvia, Inc., and, on a hunch, shortened my name to Bride, with nothing anybody needs to say before or after that one memorable syllable. (*God Help the Child* 11)

As Bride claims, Lula Ann has never turned into a woman, she never grows up, she has stopped at that stage of childhood. Lula Ann is the interrupted girl, what happens after her is the progress of an organized self which substitutes the previous one. Moreover, while the

first changings of name occur slowly, the name Bride arrives quickly, a fast changing and adaptation as if to prove how normal and not even strange is for the protagonist to change continuously her identity. Lula Ann becomes Bride when she starts her ascension through the Sylvia, Inc., a cosmetics company where now she is launching her cosmetic line YOU, GIRL. Growing up without her mother's support or love, Bride has trouble authenticating her identity as a black woman. She reinvents herself and starts displaying the color of her skin without shame claiming a feeling of empowerment; she displays her success by driving a Jaguar and she feels loved by her gorgeous boyfriend Booker as well as supported by her very special friend Brooklyn. Bride "is the modern mythos of Black beauty and grace. Bride is a living mirage with permanence in the world: smoke, mirrors, and pyrotechnics, all at once; and she is constructed of false self-confidence" (Wilson 34). Every aspect of her life is celebrated but progressively, following the narration, Morrison gives us several points of view on the characters so that we are able to understand that underneath this superficial beauty there is a fake construction, starting from her career which, as we have already pointed out in the previous chapter, forces her to exploit her blackness, highlighting it with an all-white aesthetic for clothing in order to appear more desirable for the others. She wants us to believe that she is an empowered woman who has reached success through her career culminating in the YOU, GIRL cosmetic line. A project that she presents as an encouragement for all the women to not be afraid of showing themselves but be powerful and able to embrace their real selves. And yet, she is the one who keeps on running away from her True Self; she is the one who hides from the past and persists in lying to herself as much as to the others. She uses her body, the cosmetics, and the designer clothes to embellish her False Self and to hide, underneath all these fake decorations, her True hurt Self: Lula Ann Bridewell.

This “live falsely” particularly influences her social interactions such as her relationships with Booker and her friend and colleague Brooklyn. The relation with these two characters is defined by a lack of communication which often becomes a harmful inability of communicating. In *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect* is stated that “*Communication* is not always one family member talking to another. Silences, body movements, facial expressions, voice tone, and posture all convey messages ... Communication patterns within the total family can become complex and unclear” (24). Bride, in fact, grows up with a mother who never expresses an excessive attention toward the importance of communication, actually, the positive communication between mother and daughter never takes place: instead of cuddles there are disapproving looks, harsh and aggressive voice tone that do not convey messages of love but of repudiation, disinterest and emotional neglect. Bride, therefore, never learns how to properly communicate love and care. The only time she receives a message of love is at the trial, but it teaches Lula Ann a distorted vision which only aggravates her inability to express feelings. As might be expected, the False Self (Bride) is a woman who cannot carry out an authentic communication or, at least, she carries it out in the wrong way. Even though she makes every effort to create a woman other-than-Sweetness, her False Self cannot perform a skill that neither the True Self owns. In her relationship with Booker, in fact, she realizes how little she knows him or tried to understand him more. When she first introduces Booker in her narration, she tells us that they have broken up, after that she spends words only for describing his body, the surface of Booker, how gorgeous he is and how gorgeous they were together: “head to toe, he is one gorgeous man. I’m not so bad myself, so imagine how we looked as a couple” (*God Help the Child* 10). They almost looked like those couple in the ads of the magazines; they are like images, a fake reproduction of the reality. Bride’s love for Booker focuses only on the externals: “I stroked every inch of his golden skin, sucked on his earlobes. I know the quality of the hair in his armpit; I fingered the dimple

in his upper lip” (37). Bride’s interest on Booker stops at the level of physical appearance and she demonstrates, more than one time, how much she was disinterested on his personal life. While she easily tells him some facts on her past, always avoiding the emotional distress, he listens to her, but she never asks something about his past:

never thought about that part of his life because what was important in our relationship, other than our lovemaking and his complete understanding of me, was the fun we had ... I have no idea what occupied him when I was at the office and I never asked. I thought he liked me especially because I never probed, nagged or asked him about his past. I left him his private life. I thought it showed how much I trusted him – that it was him I was attracted to, not what he did. (*God Help the Child* 61-62)

Their relationship seems to suggest the lack of a real union, it looks like “a glossy portrait of two self-centered individuals with enough shared interests, attraction, and personal freedom to embody the mirage of a successful relationship at a distance.” (Williams 93), but at the end they both cannot communicate love to each other. Booker and Bride do not live a well-balanced relation in which both can find comfort, support, and confrontation. Although Booker experiences a very troubled childhood due to the death of his brother Adam at the hand of a child molester, he is not able to communicate his pain to Bride, share it with her and find relief. Natalie King-Pedroso explains that the name “Booker” derives from the verb “to book” used in the African American folk communities and which “means to leave or depart”, it would possibly indicate “Booker’s running from his problems – literally and metaphorically – in spite of his nobility, represented a major character flaw where he emphasized ‘the shortcomings of others’ rather than acknowledges his own” (King-Pedroso 5). It does not surprise that the two characters are together: both safeguard their own

interrupted child and avoid the pain and trauma of the past by living their adulthood as if nothing happened.

A similar fake attitude is performed in the relationship between Bride and Brooklyn. Despite Bride's affirming, at the end of her first-person narrative section that Brooklyn is "the one person I can trust. Completely" (*God Help the Child* 22), the thought is immediately questioned by the opening phrase of the next section which is narrated by the first-person Brooklyn stating "She's lying" (23). Brooklyn, in fact, throughout the narration demonstrates how little she tolerates Bride and how little she truly trusts her, she is then a fake friend. Actually, we readers are the only one who discover that she even tried to have intercourse with Booker by lying naked in bed with him, and at the end leaving because he compared her to "dung" (60). We are the only one who also acknowledge that she had a rough childhood as well. She was raised by an alcoholic mother, and she was sexual abused by her uncle. Her life experiences teaches her how to coexist with her memories by becoming a people-pleaser, a woman who can easily manipulate the others in order to obtain what she wants. When Bride stays at home recovering from the attack by Sofia, Brooklyn takes advantage of the situation and works to make her way in the cosmetic industry to surpass Bride, her supposed best friend. Clearly, Brooklyn and Bride act like two best friends who do not hide secrets, but in the end, they are strangers for each other. Although their pasts could be a meeting point in their friendship, since they both experienced a childhood where communication, especially of love and caring, was carried out wrongly, they are not able to truly act as friends. In this sense, when Lula Ann Bridewell was interrupted, the process of disintegration started building the False Self of Bride which let her "live falsely" creating a fake confidence which even influences her relationships. But as Winnicott explains "In living relationships, work relationships, and friendships, however, the False Self begins to fail. In situations in which what is expected is a whole person the False Self has some essential lacking" ("Ego

Distortion in Terms of True and False Self” 142-43). In other words, it is exactly in the relationships that the False Self starts to vacillate because in these situations a True Self is asked to display his capacities and the False Self is not able to do it. Once these fake relationships start to be uncertain and lose their balance, and other events occur forcing Bride dealing with her past, the entire defence system of the False Self will be challenged and driven toward a gradual collapsing.

The collapse of the False Self coincides with the occurrence of two events: the release from prison of Sofia Huxley and the breaking up between Booker and Bride: “I’m scared. Something bad is happening to me. I feel like I’m melting away. I can’t explain it to you but I do know when it started. It began after he said, ‘You not the woman I want’” (8). A dramatic moment which opens the section immediately after the one in which Sweetness claims that Bride is not the child she wants. Sweetness and Booker’s rejection seems to determine the structural choice made by Morrison, a way to accentuate the burden of rejection that keeps on falling on the protagonist: first by her mother, now by her boyfriend (Wyatt 182). From this event, the False Self, as it happens for the True Self during childhood, starts to vacillate: the True Self is repudiated by her mother, now the False Self – a new construction built on the old one – is the one repudiated. The collapse effects Bride psychologically, dismantling the elements of the False Self, and physically by gradually changing her adult body into the one of a little girl. As her body changes, all her confidence evaporates and her past memories return to haunt her. Through this collapse of the False Self, Bride experiences what Winnicott defines as regression.

As Winnicott explains in his essay “Metapsychological and Clinical Aspects of Regression within the Psycho-Analytical Set-Up” (1954), regression is “the reverse of progress” that occurs due to a failure of the complex organization, the False Self, in an individual (133). The failure is explained as a threat of chaos which takes the ego back to the

moment when the development has been arrested and the False Self has been constructed (134). That moment is defined as the “*freezing of the failure situation*” (134) because it encapsulates when the True Self, endangered by the specific environmental failures, provoked the creation of the False Self as its defence organization (144). The regression is, then, the process in which the individual returns mentally to the freezing and encapsulation due to the fact in the individual’s present that moment is now “unfrozen”. Through the regression, the False Self is being dismantled and the True Self emerges and becomes visible again. In the case of the protagonist, she is living a present in which her False Self is slowly fading away together with all the elements that characterizes it. The release of Sofia is the trigger, the element of the present that unfreezes the “freezing moment” of the past. The trial constitutes, in fact, a trauma for Lula Ann and her development, it is one of the causes of her interruption. By unfreezing Sofia Huxley, Bride is facing her past and all the painful experiences that defines it.

The novel is a journey of Regression for Bride’s mind and for her body. As it was previously emphasized with Pecola, Winnicott considers equally important the development of “the feeling that one’s person is in one's body” during the process of integration (“Primitive Emotional Development” 63). Due to the existence of this relation between the development of the Self (the process of integration of the units) and the development of the body, when the development of the first one interrupts, the same occurs for the second one. Bride is a young woman whose body has obviously developed, but since there is a Regression of the development of the self, the same “reverse process” is felt by her body. Body and Self move together in a child and Bride sees her body changing, shrinking and becoming hairless, regressing to childhood as she goes deeper into the memories of herself, as she gradually removes any elements of her False Self and embrace her True Self. This body-regression

happens gradually and each changing of the body is significantly related to an event or a mental throwback in her past.

The first regression of her body starts the day she decides to go to the Decagon Women's Correctional Center and after that Booker leaves her with the phrase "You not the woman I want", in that moment she realizes that "Every bit of my pubic hair was gone" (*God Help the Child* 12). A changing that we could justify with the fact that she has just ended a relationship with a man with whom she had a strong physical attraction. The transformation of this body zone indicates that that kind of relationship is ended, moreover it also recalls her being a child when she saw for the last time Sofia. The second changing of the body occurs weeks later after the encounter with Sofia – when Bride tries to make amends and Sofia beats her up – the night when Brooklyn organizes the prelaunch party for YOU,GIRL: "I peer at my lobes closely and discover the tiny holes are gone. Ridiculous. I've pierced ears since I was eight years old. Sweetness gave me little circles of fake gold as a present after I testified against the Monster" (*God Help the Child* 50). In this case, the holes are linked to the role of the accessories. Sweetness awarded Bride's lies at the trial with the gift of the earrings, in the present Bride tries to ask for forgiveness by giving gifts to Sofia as well as money. Moreover, among the gifts for Sofia there is one package of the cosmetic line YOU, GIRL because, according to Bride, putting make-up on the face is like making up for a mistake committed in the past. The third and last body change happens during her journey to Whiskey at Evelyn and Steve's house who rescue her from the car incident: "It was when she stood to dry herself that she discovered that her chest was flat. Completely flat, with only the nipples to prove it was not her back" (*God Help the Child* 92). This final stage of her body-regression shows the great distance that now exists between her and the False Self. She is, in fact, physically far from the city where Bride's identity has been shaped, she is in the woods close to Whiskey deeply absorbed by the throwbacks of her memories, more and more detached from her False

Self which is completely collapsed. When she borrows Rain's clothes and they fit perfectly, Bride realizes how little she has regressed into the "scared little black girl" (*God Help the Child* 142) she used to be as Lula Ann Bridewell.

As might be expected the gradual regression of her body from adult-body to child-body goes along with the progressive abandonment of the False Self and progressive approach to the True Self. Reaching the True Self means going back to the moment of the interruption and, by doing this, Bride has to deal with the past. Getting closer to the moment of the revelation about Sofia, the trial and her lying, she finally admits that it was all due to her one precious desire: "'So my mother would hold my hand!'... 'And look at me with proud eyes, for once'" (*God Help the Child* 153). By admitting it she is able to totally unfreeze the moment of the interruption. The regression is not simply a process that she experiences in her mind; the regression dismantles her False Self, the Self she has hold on to for several years. Her living falsely was her living, was indeed her reality. During the process she does whatever it takes to keep the pieces of the False Self together; she keeps on grasping the small things that in one way or another recalls the False Self. Rather than finding overwhelmed by the past or the sense of guilt toward Sofia and the pain endured by Sweetness, she looks for comfort in some objects such as Booker's shaving brush. His brush works as a "comforter", the object that calms her down and avoids her getting caught in the loop of her worst memories. Considering that the False Self is undergoing a process of changing which requires a kind of reorganization, the child-adult is slowly adapting to this new situation. For this reason, by going back to Winnicott's theories about the Transitional Phenomena, it could be claimed that the shaving brush is a "transitional object" which, in this case, helps Bride adapting to the new environment where the False Self does not exist anymore: a passage from the fake reality to the more difficult true reality where she has to coexist with her past.

Winnicott claims that “If emotional development has got hung up at some spot, a child has to be going back whenever certain circumstances recur, to act as if still an infant or a little child” (*The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* 124-25) and this is exactly what happens to Bride. Although she does anything she can to avoid the “going back”, the collapse of the False Self urges her to return to the moment where she has got “hung up”. In this sense, she begins a quest for knowledge about herself and her life. It is a literal and metaphorical journey as well as a regression that helps her dealing with her inner interrupted child Lula Ann Bridewell. Lula Ann becomes an interrupted child due to the failed motherhood that do not support her or surround her with a facilitating and safe environment. Her process of integration experiences an arrest and evolves in the development of a False Self substituting the hurt True Self that never moves from the stage of breaking. However, Winnicott points out that the regression carries with it an advantage, the opportunity for correction of an inadequate adaptation occurred in the past (“Withdrawal and Regression” 261). In other words, since Regression is the unfreezing of a past frozen situation by re-experiencing with the individual in a regressed state, this process contains a sense of hope, a kind of second chance. Once the regression has been completed and the frozen situation has been unfrozen, the true self finally emerges, back on the surface and is able to continue its process of integration and adaptation to the environment (“Metapsychological” 134).

It is exactly this characteristic of the Regression that constitutes the main difference between Pecola and Bride. Winnicott, in fact, explains that both Regression and the splitting of the self – as Dissociation – are defensive organization. But Regression is a form of psychosis and dissociation of psychoneurosis, meaning that in the first case the recovery is possible through “various healing phenomena of ordinary life, namely friendships, nursing during physical illness, poetry, etc.,etc” while in the second case it “makes no spontaneous recovery and the psycho-analyst is truly needed” (“Metapsychological” 136). Pecola ends in

the state of interrupted child whose identity is split between the True self and the False self coexisting in the same mind and creating a state of dissociation that Winnicott labeled as psychoneurosis. She grows and never receives a support to heal from this splitting, her state seems to be destined to a perpetual interruption, a state she cannot recover from. On the other hand, Bride lives the regression from which she can experience a spontaneous recovery being the process a form of psychosis. Thus, Bride can heal thanks to the support of people that surround her with the help of characters such as Rain and Queen, as well as other elements that we will analyze later. From this analysis, it is clear that Pecola and Bride are children who suffer “horrendous physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, either through actual experience or through secondhand exposure that leaves behind scars that cannot be excised, only scabbed over” (Senapati 65). But, although they share the same state of interruption and the same experience of creation of a False Self, they are differently interrupted. As their interruption differs in the form, the way of scabbing over is different as well. In the next chapter, in fact, we will see in which form the healing process can occur in the novels, how the two interrupted children are able to move from a fragmented identity and to reach the state of a whole individual.

Chapter 4

How to Heal an Interrupted Child

4.1. The Elements of Healing

In the previous chapters, we have seen the reasons why Pecola and Bride end in a state of interruption (Chapter 1 and 2) and how they reach that state through dissociation and regression (Chapter 3). Being an interrupted child means that the development – the process of growth – of the characters has been interrupted and they find themselves stuck in a state hard to change. Especially Pecola loses every contact with reality due to the splitting of her personality and the coexistence (in her mind) with her blue-eyed False Self. Bride, on the other hand, experiences a regression which, as Winnicott points out, contains the factor of hope. Regression unfreezes the traumatic moment and encourages the individual to deal with the trauma, heal it and, later, continue his development. Since hope is part of the regression and not the dissociation, it seems that only Bride is capable of abandoning her state of interruption while Pecola is convicted to an eternal state of interruption and madness. While Bride has the opportunity to heal her fragmented identity and constitute a whole one, Pecola is left alone, unable to gather the pieces of the self, too weak to assemble a whole identity.

However, for both the protagonists there is a chance to recover from their interrupted state through two elements: the “capacity of concern” and the adult’s sense of responsibility. Two features which are interrelated to each other being the second a consequence of the first. Concern is fundamental to heal from trauma as the world trauma itself suggests. The word “trauma” derives from a Greek word that means wound of the body and which has evolved to indicate an injury of the mind as well (Greenberg, 322). A traumatized individual is injured with an open wound; therefore, he needs someone to take care of him and mend where he is

hurt. In the essay “The Development of the Capacity for Concern” (1963) Winnicott links this capacity to the sense of responsibility by asserting that it is “an important feature in social life” which “implies further integration, and further growth, and relates in a positive way to the individual’s sense of responsibility. Concern refers to the fact that the individual *cares*, or *minds*, and both feels and accepts responsibility” (174). This means that acquiring and displaying this capacity trigger, as a consequence, the responsibility of the individual in the way he acts and relates with other people. Moreover, in the context of healing trauma, there is also the requirement of the courageous act of facing the past, especially the moment when the trauma has been caused. If dealing with the past involves the idea of making amends, the individual is encouraged to appeal to his sense of responsibility, particularly if the individual is an adult and the victim a child.

Furthermore, Winnicott also emphasizes that in the medical practice the most effective remedy for a “successful eradication of disease and its cause” (“Cure” 35) results from the combination of medical care with the capacity of concern which he defines as “the ability of one individual to enter imaginatively and yet accurately into the thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears of another person” (“Cure” 36). A process that is not far from the way of approaching the same issue – healing a trauma – in the novels by Morrison. The novels, in fact, perfectly follow Winnicott’s theory by combining the “capacity of concern” with the “sense of responsibility” on three levels: between the characters, in the narrator, and finally, in the relationship between the text, Morrison and the reader. On all three levels, Morrison points to the same target: “to enter imaginatively” into the “thoughts and feelings and hopes” of Pecola and Bride and understand how to heal them. This chapter, then, focuses on where it is possible to pave the way toward restoration in the interrupted children and how the restoration of worthiness and dignity can be achieved in Pecola and Bride.

4.2 Concern and Responsibility in the Interactions between Characters

Winnicott explains that the “capacity of concern” emerges in the relationship between children and parents and then grows and strengthens continuing from childhood to adulthood (“The Development of the Capacity for Concern” 174). Ideally, a child is born and also mature within a loving and stable family which meets his physical needs and helps him develop a sense of security through a supported growth. Bride and Pecola come from an environment that, we already know, is toxic and fails every function. As a result, the capacity of concern they deal with is absent or is distorted causing further injuries toward the selves of the protagonists. For instance, Sweetness’s concern is not aimed at the protection of her daughter, it instead provokes a skin complexion in Bride, or Cholly and the twisted love he feels for Pecola is anything but love.

Due to this failed experience of concern, both Pecola and Bride never learn how to express their capacity in a real and positive way. Initially, Bride is a woman totally self-centered, she is uninterested in the life and past of her boyfriend; she is unable to communicate and be sincere with her best friend Brooklyn: she is too defined by her False self. During her regression, she will gradually learn how to really care about others and finally about herself. Her first attempt at act of concern is about Sofia Huxley who reacts by refusing her money, the make-up, or the brand-new Louis Vuitton shopping bag: “How could she think cash would erase fifteen years of life as death?” (*God Help the Child* 70). An act that immediately recalls the only example of the concern that Bride can look up to, namely, the one accomplished by Sweetness after the trial. But Sofia is not a child who easily accepts gifts in exchange for forgiveness, Bride is one of those children, she says, “who helped kill me, take my life away” (*God Help the Child* 70) so the reaction has been to knock her down. Later, Sofia will cry, and at that moment she releases all her emotion that has been hidden, and she realizes that now she is a free woman:

For the first time after all those years, I cried. Cried and cried and cried until I fell asleep. When I woke up I reminded myself that freedom is never free. You have to fight for it. Work for it and make sure you are able to handle it.

Now I think of it, that black girl did do me a favor. Not the foolish one she had in mind, not the money she offered, but the gift that neither of us planned: the release of tears unshed for fifteen years. No more bottling up. No more filth.

Now I am clean and able. (*God Help the Child* 70)

Unconsciously, Bride does help Sofia but not in the way she hopes. Her first act of concern is not perfect, but in the novel, it marks the starting point. During her journey toward Booker, Bride learns what concern really means and how it is fundamental in the process of mending her interrupted inner child. When Bride meets Rain, she is at the highest point in her regression with her body changed into a little girl, and during the six weeks that she spends at Evelyn and Steve's house, Bride finally learns a different kind of concern, the one "free, without judgment or even a passing interest in who she was or where was going" (*God Help the Child* 90). Bride is simply welcomed at the hippy couple's home and there, in the middle of the woods, far from the city, from fake friends, and the obsession with the look and makeup, the protagonist starts to heal, comforting her inner child. In this new environment Bride interacts with a couple who lives happily and in love, with a modest lifestyle without caring about the money; people that Bride finds fascinating and at the same time envies. In the beginning, she struggles in adapting to their house's rules, acting sometimes childishly, but in the end, this phase of her journey changes her attitude from a shallow woman accustomed to judge only the physical appearance into a woman who learns how to listen to people and to concern about them. Particularly, it is Rain the character that most helps Bride moving on.

Rain is a white child who shares with Bride the same failure of motherhood in every sense: from the lack of adaptation to the absence of the process of illusion and disillusion toward the non-existence of “primary maternal preoccupation”. Rain, in fact, has been neglected and forced into prostitution by her own mother experiencing dreadful abuses from several men. Despite her young age, only six years old, Rain is perfectly aware of the horrible events perpetrated in the world, she is wary of everybody, but she especially does not trust men. Unlike Bride, Rain experiences the world differently, she does not divide the world into categories of skin color; she divides it into whom she can trust and cannot (Toni Morrison Reads from and Discusses *God Help the Child* 00:23:51-00:24:13). She lives on the street by herself when her mother throws her out after she bits one of the men who is abusing her, and in that situation, Rain learns how to survive. Sharing the same difficult past, Bride immediately feels a strong connection between them, and while listening to Rain’s facts, Bride fights against the falling of the tears and is left astonished by “this tough little girl who wasted no time on self-pity” (*God Help the Child* 103). Although Evelyn and Steve rescue her from the street and they are really good with her, they never ask her story: “they frown or look away” (*God Help the Child* 104) every time she says stuff about her mother or what has occurred at her mother’s house. Talking to Bride is different, they seem to understand each other: one is a white abused child, the other is an adult regressed to a little black child, but emotionally they are at the same level.

As Na’Imah Ford suggests, “[I]n *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison revisits sisterhood. She has, in many of her novels, dealt with sisterhood whether biological or circumstantial; however, in *God Help the Child*, she revisits a sisterhood born of motherlessness and neglect” (101). Bride and Rain can be considered as two sisters who feel comfortable in talking to each other and learning from each other. In fact, by listening to Rain, Bride learns that “none of us are without pain and no pain is so precious that it must be

caged inside of us and never released” (Wilson 41). This time Bride expresses properly her capacity of concern and, just like Sofia, she is aware now of the potential behind a release of emotion, the healing one can receive by facing the pain shielded inside and protected by the False self. Her concern is so well displayed that Bride is even using an effective way of communication with another person: there is no lie behind her sentences, every question she asks Rain comes from a true feeling of acknowledging the other. Moreover, the capacity of concern becomes visible in a physical action when Bride protects Rain from a shotgun, and she injures her arm and hand. Like an older sister, with the sense of responsibility that comes from being a big sister, Bride first considers the safety of the little girl, and with great courage, she saves Rain’s life. An act that clearly demonstrates how Bride is recovering from her being an interrupted child, the one who used to be scared, unable to express or receive a true act of love. Now Rain can really trust somebody, she can trust her “black lady”: “My heart was beating fast because nobody had done that before. I mean Steve and Evelyn took me in and all but nobody put their own self in danger to save me. Save my life. But that’s what my black lady did without even thinking about it” (*God Help the Child* 105-06). Bride and Rain reveal an intense understanding of each other thanks to the shared childhood experience with neglecting mothers and a present where they must deal with their trauma in order to move on in their lives.

A similar solidarity can be noticed in *The Bluest Eye* between Pecola and the three prostitutes who live in the apartment above the Breedlove’s house: China, Poland, and Miss Marie also called the Maginot Line. These women share with the child-protagonist the isolation from the community by living as outcasts. Moreover, in the prostitutes, we can identify a sign of interruption since they are women “who had never been young and had no word for innocence” (*The Bluest Eye* 55). Three characters that could be considered as individuals whose interruption has provoked corruption which they totally embrace, making

it their strategy of survival in a society that does not accept them. Three women not bothered by the isolation, but who keep on living without any pretense of concealing their moral fall, simply freely. They are free from every social convention that they do not even worry about Pecola listening to their discussion about lovers: “With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other” (*The Bluest Eye* 55). On the one hand, they detach from the society-acceptable image, but on the other hand, they ignore the system that makes Pecola suffering. Their capacity of concern is superficial, they welcome Pecola in their apartment, sometimes give her little gifts but they never truly care for her. As evidence, when they notice that Pecola is without socks, they just make fun of her.

Unlike Bride, Pecola never displays the capacity of concern, nobody teaches her how to do it, her same environment denies it. Even though these three women express a kind of concern toward her, and Pecola loves visiting them because they do not despise her, she is still a victim of the failed environment, she is extremely fragile and already deeply fragmented, still unable to experience life outside the invisibility of her ugliness. As a result, she cannot benefit from any kind of concern, even from these scraps of caring that seldomly occur during her narration. In a like manner, it occurs with Claudia and Freida. It is necessary to underline that now the reference is for Claudia as a child because it is later in this chapter that we will see how the capacity of concern is truly performed by Claudia as an adult when she is mature and aware of the “how” and “why” of Pecola’s interruption.

However, Claudia as a child listens and observes adults and once Pecola enters her house she starts observing and analyzing her. Through Claudia’s eyes, the reader understands the difficulties of Pecola’s existence. She interacts with her, pities her, and even defends her; it could be claimed that Claudia does express concern toward the interrupted child. For instance, when she acknowledges that Pecola is pregnant she is shocked by the lack of concern from the adults. They only express disgust, amusement, shock, outrage, or are even

excited for the story, but Claudia says: “We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils” (*The Bluest Eye* 188). For this reason, while everybody wants Pecola’s baby to die, the two sisters are determined to make a miracle: they buy seeds with the money that were initially destined for their new bicycle, plant them and pray for Pecola’s baby to survive. Even though this act belongs to Claudia’s capacity of concern, she is still a child who does not know what it means that Pecola is pregnant with her father’s baby and why adults are so resolute in wishing the death of the baby. Claudia, as well as Freida, commits other acts of concern toward Pecola before the seed scene: they both help her with the arrival of the menstruation, Claudia defends Pecola from Maureen Peal and she also wants to “scratch” the white child when she calls Pauline “Polly” while Pecola must call her “Mrs. Breedlove”. Yet, Claudia is a child and her caring is not enough, is not so well-defined and effective and thus her small acts of healing do not change Pecola’s situation. Pecola is rooted in an environment whose soil is too corrupted and inhospitable for seeds to grow, even through incessant pray. Claudia-adult explains that at that time in their childhood, they were children who used to receive orders every day and they were more interested in themselves finding a way of escaping the adults’ rules than in acknowledging what was happening around them. When they found out that Pecola was pregnant they did not think about what really meant and despite their knowledge about the violence of Pauline and the jokes at school, they acted like they did not remember and continue helping Pecola wrongly.

Besides Claudia and Freida, the “capacity of concern” is also imparted by Mrs. MacTeer through “othermothering” in the brief period that Pecola spends at their house. In her book, O’Reilly claims that Morrison defines the responsibilities of motherwork through four tasks interrelated to each other: preservation, nurturance, cultural bearing, and healing (26). Together these elements enable the mothers to “(1) protect their children, physically and psychologically, (2) teach children how to protect themselves, and (3) heal adults who were

unprotected as children and hence harmed” (26). The role of the mother, then, as Morrison and Winnicott agree, is to be committed to the child by meeting his demands and protect and preserve him through love and caring (27): “self-love depends on the self first being loved by another self. Before the child can love herself, she must experience herself being loved and learn that she is indeed valuable and deserving of affection” (33). O’Reilly adds that these tasks of motherhood can also be expressed by the “othermothering” because motherhood is not only an issue of blood-relation, it relates to the capacity of caring about a child and his development; a task that, in absence of the actual mother, can be achieved by another person. Othermothering can be effective as much as well-displayed motherhood, and Morrison’s novels prove it. Pecola is welcomed in the MacTeer family where she finds two sisters and an othermother who takes care of her when she menstruated. Evelyn rescues Rain from the street and welcomes Bride after the incident. Bride and Booker are both guided by the concern derived from the othermothering of Queen.

But, despite the brief and soothing scene at the MacTeer’s house, Pecola, again, cannot be saved. The failed concern by Mrs. MacTeer suggests that even though Pecola was considered as one of her daughters, she still stands as the result of the violent Breedlove family, hence, this little act of concern only gets lost in the heap of painful actions done to her. Conversely, Bride experiences the pleasure and gifts of the othermothering through Queen Olive, Booker’s aunt, and she succeeds in reaching the stage of healing. In the same manner, Queen helps Booker by persuading him in leaving the obsession about his brother’s death: “Don’t you think he’s tired? He must be worn out having to die and get no rest because he has to run somebody else’s life” (*God Help the Child* 156). By accepting the death of his brother, Booker opens to love and has a chance to recover his brain from being a “cadaver” and his heart’s blood from being soaked in “formaldehyde” (*God Help the Child* 157).

Queen, Bride's othermother, is an old woman living by herself in a "pale-yellow mobile home" in Whiskey. Her house looks like a "witch's den" and one wall is completely "covered with photographs of children" (*God Help the Child* 145). Even though she has been married seven times and she had children – the ones in the photos – she lives alone, and her children never come to visit her. From Queen Bride learns more than one important lesson. First, she collects a lot of information about Booker such as Adam's death and the writings that he sent his aunt: papers of his thoughts about Bride and their relationships. "There were seven sheets. One for each month they were together – plus one more" (*God Help the Child* 148) and by reading them, Bride realizes the shallowness and cowardice she has performed during their relationship in response to past and trauma. Most of all, from his writings, she realizes that in the end, she has constructed her life as the product of "the vital lesson Sweetness taught" and which, now she realizes, has been "nailed to her spine" curving it (*God Help the Child* 151). Second, thanks to Queen, Bride learns the importance of concern in adult life and be finally able to totally deconstruct her False Self. She exhorts both Bride and Booker to release their pain of the past, to share it, and then heal it through the concern about the others combining love and caring. Queen, therefore, urges them to grab the opportunity to become tridimensional people by abandoning their egocentricity and stop thinking about their little selves.

Queen is able to display the concern and to instill it into them because she speaks from the point of her personal experience, especially because of one painful experience: the relationship with her daughter, her youngest and "dream child" (*God Help the Child* 147), Hannah. Not surprisingly, Hannah is an abused child – who perfectly fits in a novel about hurt children – and she is the reason why Queen fails as a mother. In fact, when Hannah reveals she has abused by her father, Queen does not believe her and, as Booker suggests, "The ice between them never melted" (*God Help the Child* 170). A fact which recalls the

relationship between Pauline and Pecola as far as the denial, and lack of support, that the abused children receive from their own mothers are concerned. This event deeply changes Queen: now she is an old woman mature enough to trace back her past identifying and understanding her failures and regrets. Since she is aware of the breaking that can occur in the relationships and how it is hard to move on when one keeps on clinging to the painful memories, making a living out of it and never be able to finally release them, she also “knew from personal experience how hard loving was, how selfish and how easily sundered. Withholding sex or relying on it, ignoring children or devouring them, rerouting true feelings or locking them out” (*God Help the Child* 158). Queen urges the young couple to talk to each other and be honest to later direct their concern toward others than themselves and stop limiting their life within the walls of their own problems and pain.

Moved by Queen’s encouragement, Bride goes to Booker’s house and there they have their moment of truth. During the fight, they finally get rid of the weight of their painful memories, they admit that their relationship did not work due to the great number of lies and silences about their childhood and their inner thoughts which only contributed to create a larger breaking between them. Bride finally admits that she lied at the trial, and she tried to make amend by asking for forgiveness from Sofia; Booker, on his part, tells her the reason why he left with the harsh phrase “You not the woman I want” (*God Help the Child* 8): since he knew that Bride was going to assist a woman accused of child abuse, he was disgusted by her act. His life, in fact, after Adam’s murder has been defined just by his mission of defender of children, ready to protect the young individuals from those men that seem the nicest in the world – like the retired auto mechanic who abused and murdered his brother.

After their discussion, once they have been true to themselves and each other about their past, they are finally able to take control of their adult life because they have understood the responsibility that comes with the entrance into adulthood. Now, after taking

responsibility for their actions, they can direct their capacity of concern toward another individual. In this case, they immediately display it when Queen is injured in the fire that explodes in her house. Saving Queen from the fire determines an important step in Bride's journey. After pulling the woman out of her house, using the strength of her body to rescue her, Bride realizes that her body has returned to the original shape, the shape of a woman. The rescue concludes her regression and means that Bride is beyond her interruption: she has faced her past, taking her responsibilities, she has been honest with herself and with her lover, and she has put the concern of somebody else before her.

As a way to announce the healing of the wounds of the past and this new journey in the future for Bride and her True Self, two elements are employed: Queen's earrings and Bride's pregnancy. The first one, Queen's gold earrings, is given to her by Booker who says, "She prized them and would want you to wear them while she recovers" (*God Help the Child* 169). A gift that expresses her achievement in the changing of her attitude and, at the same time, they come as a substitution of those earrings that Sweetness gave her after the trial. While the earrings she receives from her mother symbolize her traumatic childhood, the earrings of her othermother become a symbol of healing, of an unselfish concern that has mended her inner-interrupted child. The pregnancy, instead, represents the future for both Bride and Booker. Expecting a baby becomes an even more important chance to be caregivers of another individual. The baby is the promise for a better future, a responsibility that they must keep on protecting, valuing, and caring for. When Bride tells Booker about the baby "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" (*God Help the Child* 175). At the end of her journey toward Whiskey, Bride has finally abandoned the construction of the False Self, she has revealed her True Self, facing all the memories that have hurt it; and now with all her scars mended and the experience of her journey, she can

continue her development and be the woman she wants, not the one that others expect her to be.

Nevertheless, the optimistic scene between Bride and Booker about their future baby is dampened first by the cynic tone of the third-person narrator: “A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath. So they believe” (*God Help the Child* 175) and, in the following page, Sweetness’ harsh words. Significantly, to conclude the novel is, in fact, Sweetness’ first-person narrative, the not-good-enough mother, the woman who has let her daughter in a state of interruption. Sweetness greets the news of the baby with the same thought and preoccupation that welcomed her daughter in the world: the color of the skin. But, for just a brief moment, Sweetness seems to atone her mistakes by admitting that underneath she regrets some choices she made when Bride was a child; however, immediately after this moment of regret, she drives away those memories and claims “I know I did the best for her under the circumstances”, what she did was her only way of surviving with a heavy “burden” such as Bride (*God Help the Child* 177). At this point of the narration, Sweetness becomes the most explicit example of an adult who is unable to take responsibility and prefers hiding behind justifications and blaming her daughter. Sweetness is so sure about the maternal role that she claims that the successful career of Bride happened thanks to her. Yet even though her attitude shows the persistence of not-good-enough mothering, she ends the novel with a right warning addressed to her daughter and her future baby:

If you think mothering is all cooing, booties and diapers you’re in for a big shock. Big. You and your nameless boyfriend, husband, pickup – whoever – imagine OOOH! A baby! Kitchee kitchee koo!

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. (*God Help the Child* 178)

Harsh words recalling the sense of responsibility of adults, especially motherhood which requires energies, concern, and, of course, responsibility. By ending the novel with this warning, Morrison is suggesting that despite her recovering from the interruption, Bride is not immune from the possibility of making more mistakes. Even though she has overcome her interruption, it does not mean she cannot provoke one in her baby; that is why Morrison admonishes: “Never settle for happiness, it is not good enough ... You can’t just stand up and happens happiness. You have to be good” (Toni Morrison Reads from and Discusses *God Help the Child* 00:51:41-00:52:42).

In conclusion, from this analysis, it is obvious that the two elements – capacity of concern and sense of responsibility – displayed at the level of interactions between characters have benefited Bride and not Pecola toward the path of healing. Moreover, considering that there is a link between the “capacity of concern” and the capacity of resilience, Bride’s path seems more promising. Dealing in her journey with environments that facilitate positive interactions and learnings, she has developed a resilience which is defined as the product of “a dynamic process in which psychological, social, environmental and biological factors interact to enable an individual ... to develop, maintain, or regain their mental health despite exposure to adversity” (Wathen et al. 694). Besides, in Bride, her resilience is mixed with the sense of hope that derives from her regression, a feature that involves looking in a different way toward the future.

If Bride uses her resilience to become a survivor of a painful childhood, Pecola is a survivor who finds her strategy of healing in madness. Unable to cherish the small acts of concern appearing in her narration, her falling into dissociation cannot be prevented. From a psychological point of view, the ways of coping in an individual who has undergone a harsh childhood include spending time with other people and resist the tendency to isolate, together

with the necessity to talk about the feelings and pain and the comfort by the child's family (Hoven et al. 36-37). Pecola and the people that surround her do not follow any of these coping mechanisms. She does not cope in a healthy way with her trauma: she isolates herself, she is not supported by her family, she cannot deal with her feelings, and most of all, she ends in a state of dissociation with a split personality. When facing difficulties, people who demonstrate resilience show their ability to get through: Pecola – who cannot develop her resilience – surrenders and just accepts the splitting of her own self.

Given these circumstances, it is questionable whether healing in the interruption of Pecola is possible or not. Instinctively, the answer would be not, because Pecola grows and becomes a woman who still carries her dissociation, and since she remains split, her interruption seems impossible to mend. Yet, worthiness and dignity are given back to her identity, her story does not get lost with her split self. By telling her story, the events that caused her dissociation, Claudia, the adult narrator, is employing the art of fiction to restore identity in Pecola. Now being Claudia an adult, she is aware of the importance of concern in adulthood life, she is now responsible for Pecola's story and, most of all, as a narrator she has the responsibility to let Pecola's story speak and become a warning for the adults and their role with children.

4.3 The Capacity of Concern and Responsibility in the Role of the Narrator

The previous analysis has stressed the functions of the capacity of concern and the sense of responsibility in the interactions between the characters that enable, or fail in doing so, the two protagonists to follow the path of healing. While Bride benefits from these interactions, Pecola never overcomes her interruption due to the lack of a facilitating environment and her being unable to assimilate the acts of concern she experiences. This section, then, focuses on other two ways through which it is possible to appeal to the capacity of concern and the adult's sense of responsibility, namely, storytelling and the urgency of arresting the "domino effect". Two more ways through which another path is paved to restore the identity in both protagonists.

Especially in *The Bluest Eye*, these two features are fundamental for Pecola who, in the end, it may be argued, restores her identity into a whole. Claudia, the narrator, is the one responsible for this achievement by employing the power of narration: telling Pecola's story she explains how the child ended in that state, and she uses Pecola's experience as a symbol, a warning for the adult world. Specifically, Claudia uses her sense of guilt to construct Pecola again, to gather all the pieces of her weak self and restore them into a whole identity. Winnicott explains that it is inherent in the sense of guilt to destruct and construct, because if on the one hand, guilt destroys the inner world of an individual, on the other hand, it also allows the individual to improve, to construct something good to alleviate the heavy burden of the guilt ("Aggression, Guilt and Reparation" 26). It is, then, by admitting her mistakes and the mistakes of the adults of the community, that Claudia is returning her self-worth to Pecola. By narrating the adult's behavior, Claudia underlines the importance of the "domino effect" of the parents' lives on their children's and demonstrates to the readers that Pecola's "ugliness" derived from the failed intersubjectivity between the child and her parents. Being their parents damaged in their identities by the same challenging reality of racism and White

supremacy that Pecola deals with every day, they cannot avoid trapping their child in the same pain and feeling of estrangement that they also went through in their life and their relationship with the community. Pecola's parents are damaged individuals who behave in the only way they have learnt to do; in other words, they cannot healthily display love if they, in the first place, have never experienced a healthy love expression. By pointing at this issue, Claudia is calling our attention toward the consequences of damaged intersubjectivity and, at the same time, she is removing Pecola from that mantle of ugliness, and she is restoring into her the idea of the valued child she deserves to be. However, before reaching the moment of truth at the end of the novel, Claudia uses other features to guide the reader's reflection on the importance of the capacity of concern and the role of responsibility in the adults dealing with interrupted children.

The first feature is the choice of giving voice to the children's point of view. In *God Help the Child* it is also accomplished with the use of the first-person narrative that perfectly expresses the inner thoughts of the characters. The access to their mind, particularly, in this novel, stands as a decision not to silence their abuses, but to let them speak to denounce the pain that some of them, Rain, for instance, can suffer at the hands of their parents. In *The Bluest Eye*, the narrator Claudia employs a mixture of her awareness reached by being an adult and the naïve vision and memories of when she was a child dealing with the handling the events. A narrative choice is made to let us readers understand reality as experienced by a child, what kind of feelings he relates to certain situations, particularly if those situations are considered neutral or harmless from an adult point of view. For example, in the scene of the arrival of Mr. Henry at the MacTeer's house when the two sisters were "merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet is here; and these are my kids, Freida and Claudia; watch out for this window; it don't open all the way" (*The Bluest Eye* 13). An attitude that for Mrs. MacTeer was innocuous and did not mean her lack of interest in her

children, but from the point of view of a child, as Claudia emphasizes, it sounded like not caring, a lack of importance on the part of both her mother and the guest. Moreover, the voice of Claudia as a child is also heard when she wants to denounce the threatening world that hurts the children with the beauty standards and the ambiguous behavior of the adults, for example, when she expresses her refusal of playing with the White doll or the way she talks about Maureen Peal as well as her reaction after Mr. Henry molests her sister. Underneath the innocent and naïve vision expressed by Claudia's childhood memories, there is an encouragement to the reader to reflect on what she has said, connecting her simple thought to the more complex meaning that is hidden behind it.

The second feature used in the novels to address the importance of concern and responsibility is the stress on the idea of the “domino effect” that occurs in the relationship between parents and children. For “domino effect” we mean that endless cycle of pain that originates from an adult and falls on the child. The toxic behavior is made visible especially with the use of overlapping narratives, namely, the movement in the novels between the events of the past and the events of the present. The continuous time shifts create an idea of an echoing of the past in the present, it points out the common thread that connects the actions of the past to the reactions of the present. Particularly, it is the opportunity to access the information concerning the childhood of Pauline, Cholly, and Sweetness that the existence of the “domino effect” and the importance of arresting it is demonstrated.

Winnicott claims that parents do not have to be the embodiment of perfection, because humans are imperfect and the “[p]erfection belongs to machines”, but that what the children need is “the care and attention of someone” who helps them creating their True Self (“From Dependence Towards” 87-88). One of the main concepts is that a healthy parent can raise and support the healthy development of his child, yet, if the parents do not work hard in correcting their mistakes or in coping with their trauma to make their present better, their role

will surely be affected by their unresolved issues and open wounds of the past. As a result, the children and the relationship parent-child will only be soaked in pain provoking the deepest fractures in the self. As it was already pointed out in the previous chapters, Winnicott warns the parents on the importance of never involve, without filters, the child in the state of their anxiety or fear as well as in the relationship between husband and wife. A precaution that parents, and adults in general, should take every time a child is involved.

However, the narrative choice of giving voice to the “parent-abusers” should not be confused with a way of justifying their actions. Learning that Sweetness has grown in a family that has been split because of shades of skin color or that Pauline’s family has never really considered her, or that Cholly has been abandoned both by his mother and father and has experienced a painful trauma during his first sexual intercourse, do not stand as justifications, but as a reason to exhort the adults in taking their responsibility of facing their past to avoid the repetition of pain in the present time of their children. For this reason, Morrison makes both *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* multi-vocal novels with overlapping narratives. It is a chance for the reader to enter in the mind of the characters who take part in the interruption of Pecola and Bride and reflect on, as Morrison says in an interview, “the way in which people can hurt each other *about* whether or not one is beautiful ... how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on to it ... About love and how to survive – not to make a living – but how to survive *whole* in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, *victims of something*” (Bakerman 60).

Therefore, the narrative choices of listening to the voice of children, like Claudia and Rain, and the tangle of past and present aim to underline the necessity of the adults to always concern themselves about the children’s feelings, to never diminish their emotional sphere just because they are young and not fully aware of the world; and directing the same concern to the arresting of the “domino effect” of pain. As Queen suggests, adults should learn fast

that a heavyweight of the past is a condition and not a disease, it is an emotional state that can be faced. During youth, the dealing with the trauma can be excused for the innocence and the lack of experience, but at the stage of adulthood, the sense of responsibility must be employed, or otherwise, it becomes “pure adult stupidity” (*God Help the Child* 158).

Throughout the narration of the events, Claudia, now an adult and able to display her sense of responsibility and concern, lifts Pecola out of her invisibility. The accomplishment is not only about telling Pecola’s story, page after page, Claudia is assembling Pecola, she is employing her role of adult-narrator to “sum” Pecola’s childhood experiences and the environmental factors of her development, to restore the dignity that was denied to her from the very beginning of her existence. In addition, Claudia is employing her adult awareness and maturity to admit the mistakes committed by the adults of the community that had never been concerned about Pecola, but just isolated her and her suffering:

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. 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.
(*The Bluest Eye* 203)

Pecola has been the scapegoat of the community and Claudia points out the hypocrisy they displayed: the fake good behavior which they used to hide. The adults were aware of the lies and the distorted images caused by the White standards that fed Pecola’s mind and affected her identity, but they remained unmoved, spectators of her burden that slowly killed her little self. Unconcerned about her feelings, they kept on stepping on her identity, isolating her, making fun of her, and letting her fall into a state of madness. Even though they

considered themselves a community, they were all self-centered individuals who were just concerned about their identities.

When she was a child, Claudia planted the seeds to help Pecola, but those seeds never grew. Now adult she realizes that the fault was not in how deep she planted them but in the soil of her town. Children, Claudia suggests, are like seeds that need to be planted, nurtured, and let grow in beautiful flowers under the loving concern of the adults. Pecola has been the victim of adults' lack of responsibility who even now do not admit that they failed and killed Pecola's self. It has never been Pecola's fault: the soil, the environment where she was "planted", where she grew was inhospitable, not-facilitating, abounding in adult's unconcern. Now Pecola is an adult but, Claudia claims, it is too late for her; she is too fragmented to be able to put together her whole identity. Nevertheless, Claudia has still one last chance to help her, the last chance to restore the worthiness in Pecola's weak self. As a narrator, she has the power to transmit her concern about Pecola, and about the interrupted children at large, to the adults, to the readers. Before it gets too late, adults should step out of their self-centered view and look out for children whose development has been interrupted and help them become the beautiful flowers they deserve to be. It is, then, at this level that Claudia, through her emerging consciousness of a woman, restores a whole identity in Pecola.

4.4 The Capacity of Concern and Responsibility from Morrison to the Readers

In the previous section, it has been pointed out the capacity of concern and the sense of responsibility expressed through the narrator and how this role can pave the way of healing for the interrupted children, particularly by employing certain features concerning the involvement of the reader in the narration. In fact, from the very beginning of *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, Claudia's prologue is introduced with the phrase "*Quiet as it's kept*" which sets immediately the idea of a shared secret between her and the reader; an opening which "provides the stroke that announces something more than a secret shared, but as silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last" ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 184). In the same manner, the multivocality of the novels – a shift between child-voice, adult-voice, and the third-person omniscient narration – fosters the idea of involvement for the reader by pushing his imaginative entrance in the thoughts, feelings, and memories of the characters, and enabling him to understand them as much as possible. In this section, the focus is on the role of the reader to whom Morrison asks the capacity of concern and the sense of responsibility toward the two protagonists. Morrison entrusts us in healing the interrupted children.

In the first place, it is necessary to define what Morrison requires from the reader and what she expects from the relation with him: "What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along" ("The Site of Memory" 244). She desires readers that completely trust her and her narration, abandoning their reality to fully dive into the depth of her novels and read and feel every word. A concept that she echoes in her 1996 acceptance speech delivered on the occasion of receiving the Distinguished Contribution to American Literature Award from the National Book Award Foundation:

Underneath the cut of bright and dazzling cloth, pulsing beneath the jewelry, the life of the book business is very very serious. It's real life. It is about creating and producing and distributing knowledge ... it's about making it possible for the entitled as well as the dispossessed to experience one's own mind dancing with another's; it's about making sure that the environment in which this work is done is welcoming and is supportive. (1996 National Book Foundation Medal 00:23:50- 24:46)

The reader, then, has to be active, actively engaged with the author and the “dynamic process out of which textual meaning derives” (Smith 3). The reader has to be ready to start “dancing” with the characters, the narrator, and the author in an “environment” (the narration) that promotes knowledge and awareness; a role that proves that a novel is more than an item embellished with a “bright and dazzling cloth.”

However, Morrison does not ask only for “action” from the readers, she requires also a “reaction.” This is why both *The Bluest Eye* and *God and Help the Child* end with a warning, a call to the readers not to limit Pecola and Bride's experience to their respective books. It is an exhortation to bring those experiences, those characters, and their pain as well as happiness into the everyday life of the readers. She explains in her 2001 interview with Susan Swain that she wants “reading” to “become a habit . . . among everyday work”, she wants her readers to take her novels and “argue about it, debate it, quarrel about it, disagree with it” (qtd in Fraser xi): to the reader Morrison asks to avoid the interruption outside the novels. Even more significantly, if the readers of the novels here analyzed are parents or adults who interact with children or whose inner-child is still hurt, they become the chosen ones, the readers in charge of recognizing the essence of the novels, what the author defines as the “invisible ink” which “lies under, between, outside the lines, hidden until the right reader discovers it”, namely, the reader “made for” that book (“Invisible Ink” 348). It is in

this sense that Morrison sets a reaction, a challenge for the readers, especially the adults. An attitude that she has always displayed, even in her children's books and which has enabled Neal A. Lester to define her as an "advocate of children" (135); because of her interest in the issues related to childhood and the relationship between the child and the adult's world. Among her production, we can find seven children's books : *The Big Box* (1999) *The Book of Mean People* (2002) – both written in collaboration with her son Slade Morrison – and *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004).

Morrison's great ability is that in these children's books are displayed, on a smaller scale, some of the features also employed in her primary production as well as the idea of provoking a strong response in the adult audience. In the children's books, it is possible to experience the point of view of the children by hearing their voices in the stories and the "domino effect" of the evil actions. Books in which the child's view focuses on how the child looks at the adult's world which, in their perspective, is odd, controlled by countless rules, and even mean because it limits their freedom. Giving space and voice to the evil characters of the novel, pointing out the concept that behind any actions, in particular the negative ones, there is an explanation, a triggering factor that causes a certain kind of behavior are features that stress the fact that no one is immune from being hurt. Toni Morrison, standing on the side of the children, directs these stories to a young audience but, at the same time, turns them into a provocation for adult readers, an invitation to reflect on how they relate with children. As Neal Lester remarks, "Morrison's subversiveness comes in creating children's texts that are not tools for adult control over children's behavior but rather tools adults can use to better understand children's emotional positions and children's perspectives on and interpretations of adult behavior" (137).

Morrison and her role of "advocate of children" is then part and essence of her entire production. Her interest in the topic of children combined with the features that she puts in

the novels becomes a double challenge for the adult reader. On the one hand, Morrison encourages the adults to follow her “narrative imagination”, entering the points of view of the characters and becoming “an intelligent reader of a person’s story” understanding their “emotions and wishes and desires” (López 54). On the other hand, they are persuaded to avoid the fixation on one perspective, and to keep an open and wide view which can include every shade of a character; like a game of lights and shadows, concluding that nothing is what appears but accept the challenge to explore what is hidden behind the surface of things. Two challenges that lead to one fundamental aim: the adults’ awareness of the fragile child-caring and development; processes that require concern and responsibility in order to avoid enormous harm.

The Bluest Eye and *God Help the Child* are evidence of her dedication toward the children, both regarding the consequences of a painful childhood. After almost fifty years since the publication of the first novel, in 2015 Toni Morrison published her last one bringing back the attention of the audience toward the role of the child and the importance of giving worth to the children. In a 2015 interview, she discusses her experience of raising two children, claiming that arrived at the age of eighty-four she was aware of the mistakes she committed in the past with her children, and looking back to those days she felt regret: “I never did think that I would hurt them in a way while it was going on. Afterwards, I remember every error, every word I spoke that was wrong or incontinent, every form of when I did not protect them properly. Now that I’m eighty-four, I remember everything as a mistake, and I regret everything” (“I Regret Everything” 00:13:44-00:15:26). The regret she talks about is probably what pushed her to write again about children; to tell a story on childhood and the complex relation between adults and children, adulthood and childhood, and to warn her readers to never stop facing these issues but to keep on learning, acknowledging, and reflecting. A warning to improve and to learn from mistakes even though

you are eighty-four years old. Therefore, by writing again about a child, “the most delicate member of society”, who ends in a state of interruption, she reinforces the message left by Claudia and stresses again the complexity of childhood and its fragile link with adulthood. Toni Morrison’s role as an “advocate of children” is to challenge the adults and hope that they (especially the parents-readers) urge in looking honestly their relationship with children; a challenge to step outside their socially scripted roles “to listen to and to respect even children who seemingly occupy socially and legally powerless positions” (Lester 137). At the same time, dealing with the issue of childhood, Morrison is also addressing the inner child of the adult, particularly, if he is hurt, injured by trauma. *God Help the Child* is about a woman who shields her interrupted-inner child within a construction of a False Self; her journey of healing becomes in this sense emblematic; what she learns constitutes a great message for those readers who can identify in Bride.

Undoubtedly, Toni Morrison deserves to be entitled “advocate of children” and her works demonstrate how she is interested in writing about children, who being victims of the trauma and abuses inflicted by adults and the society as well, are broken by their experiences and can be identified as interrupted children. By posing her gaze on them, the readers are encouraged to look and to explore their environment in its dynamics and its attitudes.

Toni Morrison writes the life events of Pecola and Bride by telling their specific cases but, at the same time, making them universal. She aims to focus on what has occurred to the child-protagonist and to understand “how” and “why” they end in an interrupted state. Therefore, it is difficult to properly assert that healing from an interruption and reaching a whole is possible, even in Bride and Pecola’s cases. Their stories lead, like Bride’s, to a bittersweet open ending which triggers our hope that she and her baby will never face the pain again; or, like Pecola, to a miserable ending with Claudia closing the narration like a cry repeating that for the protagonist “it’s much, much, much too late” (*The Bluest Eye* 204). It

might be that Morrison wants to let neither of the two protagonists achieving a whole identity because it is surely impossible due to the love, pain, and experiences that can occur in an individual lifetime. What is fundamental is how the individual copes with the interruption, how she can heal the injuries and accept the scars that they leave.

Morrison, then, trusts the capacity of concern and the sense of responsibility for the healing process on us, readers, by ending *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* with warnings, and not responses, toward the interrupted children. A call that Morrison makes to exhort the readers to take on an active role and to avoid the mistake of interrupting children's development. By using the vocabulary set by Winnicott, through her two novels, Morrison asks adults, asks readers, to make the environmental factors functioning, providing the roles of mothers and fathers adequately, in a good-enough manner; creating a facilitating environment in which the child can live freely a cultural experience but still protected. An environment where the True Self is enriched, nurtured, strengthened. At the same time, an environment where the child can also make mistakes, but the ones that help her evolving and not interrupting the development.

Morrison wants us, readers, to continue the process of healing of the Pecolas and Brides by taking their experiences out of the pages of the novels, never forgetting about their interruption, how their interruption occurred, and, particularly, never forgetting about the importance of concern and responsibility that adults need to display for the children and their inner child. While Morrison places the children and the inner children as protagonists in the two novels, Winnicott emphasizes the complexity of children and their development in his studies, two approaches which aim at stressing the same issues: the importance of caring and the adult role to avoid the painful interruption in the "going-on-being" of children's development.

During her speech addressed at Howard University in March 1995 before an audience of students and professors, Morrison claims: “It’s important to know that nothing is more important than our children. And if our children don’t think they are important to us, if they don’t think they are important to themselves, if they don’t think they are important to the world, it’s because we have not told them. We haven’t told them that they are our immortality” (Morrison 00:57:29-00:58:10). Winnicott, on his part, during a talk he gives to the Nursery School Association Conference in April 1966 claims:

I start, therefore, with a plea: remember the individual child, and the child’s developmental process, and the child’s distress, and the child’s need for personal help, and the child’s ability to make use of personal help, while of course remembering the importance of the family and the various school groups and all the other groups that lead on to the one that we call society. (“The Child in the Family Group” 41)

Both Morrison and Winnicott draw their attention toward the importance of children and the importance of being concerned about them. To be concerned as a way to help them gaining self-confidence and strength during their development as well as to emphasize that children belong to a family and to a society from which, again, they have to be considered and included. The emphasis highlights the fact that children are part of a bigger process, a bigger mechanism, in which they constitute the past, the present, and the future. The past because adults educate them on the mistakes and the catastrophic effects to avoid the repetition in the future, as well as, they receive the positive influence they can transmit in the future. They are the present because it is in the present time that adults must instill the power of self-worth in them, shaping them in the best possible way and with deep-rooted identity. Finally, children are the future because with the knowledge passed on by the adults, their positive influence, and the power of self-worth received during their process of growth, when

they become adults, they have the duty and responsibility to continue the same process with other children. By preserving this cycle of protection of each other, of concern and responsibility, as Morrison says, children assert their role of in building immortality, in the sense that they will keep on transmitting the same sense of concern and responsibility toward the next generations and, hopefully, avoid the interruption in children's development.

Concluding Remarks

By analyzing and comparing Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* with the support of Donald D. Winnicott's theories, it is possible to draw three main conclusions. First, we may conclude that Bride and Pecola experience an almost identical interruption of their identities. The two novels display a very similar pattern of failures depending on environmental factors that force them to produce a "False Self" which later brings them on two different paths: dissociation and regression. Second, this dissertation highlighted the hostile environment of the two protagonists by gauging the healthy functions of the "facilitating environment" and "good-enough mother" (as Winnicott presents them) against the novels' hostile environment dominated by Racism and White supremacy. Through this contrast, it has been noticed that Morrison introduces a further complexity in the theory of the "environmental factors", namely, the "domino effect": that endless cycle of pain that occurs in the damaged intersubjectivity of the characters. A factor that demonstrates how the interruption of Pecola and Bride comes from a previous interruption that occurred in the characters that surround them, particularly in Pauline, Sweetness, and Cholly. A condition that underlines the idea of how an interrupted self, that is still battered by a painful reality, cannot originate positive support for someone else, especially if the one who requires it is a child, a fragile individual still unable to defend herself. Third, this dissertation discussed the process of healing of Pecola and Bride, employing Winnicott's two interrelated concepts of the "capacity of concern" and the "sense of responsibility." These two elements can be detected in the novels on three levels: in the interaction between characters, especially in the relationships Claudia-Pecola and Rain-Bride, in the narrator, and in Toni Morrison's involvement of the readers. By retracing the two protagonists' journeys towards their interrupted development and to their eventual healing, it is possible to conclude that *The*

Bluest Eye and *God Help the Child* are very similar in the way they portray a child-character even though one is an actual child and the other an inner child.

Moreover, it is possible to claim that, by analyzing and comparing Morrison's two novels, this dissertation was mainly intended to draw the attention, through the interrupted children's condition, on the fragility and complexity of childhood and on the crucial role of the adults as care-givers. This study aimed at emphasizing the importance of support and protection that needs to be directed toward children from the close circle of home and family to the greater environment of society. Publishing *God Help the Child* after almost fifty years from her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison wants to shed light again on the children battered and fragmented by painful experiences and wants to warn and encourage one more time the adults in taking their responsibilities. The adults' sense of responsibility stands in the construction of the child's identity, in the capacity of caring, of loving them, of guiding them in the outside world with filters, with illusions and, of course, protection, but at the same time teaching them about difficult and dangerous challenges they will deal with. More importantly, by taking their responsibilities, adults foster a proper development for the children, passing on the instruments to behave correctly with their future children in order to avoid the mistake of reproducing a negative "domino effect".

Lastly, this dissertation proved that both Winnicott and Morrison considered childhood as the critical period of individuals, the years that gather the first "units" of the self and determine the strengths and weaknesses that will stay with them once adult. By quoting Winnicott one more time: "The aim in child care is not only to produce a healthy child but also to allow of the ultimate development of a healthy adult. The reverse of this statement is what concerns me here, which is that the health of the adult is laid down at all stages of infancy and childhood." ("Psychoses and Child Care" 220).

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