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Late Style in Toni Morrison's  
Latest Published Novels  
A Study in Genders

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## Introduction

The concept of late style in artists is an interesting and relatively new one. The idea that the more artists get closer to death, the more their state of mind, troubled by their impending end, bleeds into their work, making it different from anything they have ever produced before, is one that fascinates scholars from all over the world. Already in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the philosopher Theodor Adorno starts writing about late style in a renowned artist like Beethoven, underlining the negativity present in the composer's late works as he approached the end of his career and of his life.

In the 1980s, another great scholar, Edward Said, approached the subject with the clear purpose of paying attention to those artists who found themselves unable to accept their coming to the end of their lives, those artists who, after many years, even decades, of fulfilling artistic production, could not find peace and harmony when faced with the end of their career. In his collection of essays published in 2006, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, Said analyzes the late production of various artists ranging from Beethoven, Glenn Gould, and Mozart – as far as music is concerned – to Lampedusa, Jean Genet, and Cavafy – as far as literature is concerned. As he proceeds in his analysis, he discovers that the late works of all these artists – regardless of their chosen field of artistic production – display elements of uncooperativeness, negativity, and melancholy for a past long gone and that can never return.

But, at this point, one question must be asked: what about female artists?

All the writers and composers that Said analyzes are men who, in general terms, write about other men and their stories. At no point in his analysis does Said ever pose the question of whether or not female artists react in a different way to their approaching end. Does their late style follow the same patterns as their male colleagues', or is it completely different? If it is different, are there similarities between the two styles or do we have to consider them as two completely divergent currents?

The purpose of this thesis is to see if the categories of late style Edward Said individuates in his collection of essays – the presence of an inescapable past, the denial, even disappearance, of death as a way to avoid accepting it, the impossibility to build a future for oneself, the inability to change one’s life so close to its end –, can properly include the late novels published by an accomplished writer such as Toni Morrison, the author I chose as the subject of this analysis.

Since the start of the new millennium, Toni Morrison has published four new novels: *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012), and *God Help the Child* (2015). The choice of the author resides in my belief that Toni Morrison represents the perfect candidate to analyze through the lens of late style, both because of her age – she was seventy-two when she published *Love* and eighty-four when she published *God Help the Child* – and because of her lengthy and accomplished career – she published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970.

To understand whether female authors’ late style is different from that of their male colleagues, I will divide this thesis in two main parts, each made up of four chapters. In the first part of the thesis, I will analyze each of Toni Morrison’s latest novels – in chronological order – through the categories of late style individuated by Said. In this way, I wish to ascertain whether there are any similarities at all between Morrison’s writing style in her late period, and that of the male artists Said analyzes, or whether it is impossible to even attempt a study of her late novels through categories developed for male authors who write primarily about other men.

In the second part of this thesis, I will analyze Toni Morrison’s late novels from a perspective that presumes a distancing from Said’s study to pay attention exclusively to what Morrison herself wishes to convey through her novels, as a woman who writes primarily about other women, about their stories, their struggle for self-definition, their relationships both with men and other women. By discarding Said’s categories as I analyze a second time these four novels, I wish to see if new categories of late style arise from Toni Morrison’s own writing style that differ from the ones Edward Said proposes in his essays – categories accepted as the standard method to ascertain the presence of late style in authors by all those, after Said, who decide to expand on this subject.

Because of the themes I will treat in this thesis – some of the categories of late style are quite similar, differing only because of slight nuances of meaning –, and because of the comparative nature of the second part of this work, I will be forced to repeat myself at times when analyzing various plot points in the four novels by Toni Morrison that I have chosen to use as the primary study materials. These repetitions serve the specific purpose of underlining the differing interpretations of specific scenes in the novels, and will be kept to a minimum whenever possible.

# Part I

## Chapter 1.1

In his collection of essays regarding the study of late style as it presents itself in the late works of various artists – ranging from composers, to writers, to movie directors – Edward Said identifies a series of characteristics that could help us categorize the hard to define concept of ‘late style’. Among these characteristics, which I will analyze in the course of this thesis, there is the particularly relevant role played by the past in the creation of the artist’s late work. Of course, the mere words ‘late style’ inevitably lead us to think of an artist at the end of his career, with a full life behind him that must be taken into consideration if one wishes to fully appreciate and understand the work in question.

What Said focuses on in his essays is the artist’s reaction to his past – specifically to the way he has unknowingly restricted himself to an idea of himself/herself as someone who only writes, composes, plays in a specific way and who risks remaining confined within categories he cannot hope to break out of. Together with this sense of confinement there is also the painful realization of “being at the end, fully conscious, full of memories, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present” (Said 14).

This awareness can bring a sense of acceptance of the past now gone accompanied by an acknowledgement of the ever closer end of one’s life as John Updike aptly explains in his article “Late Works” on *The New Yorker*. As he analyses Shakespeare’s last works, the image he presents us is that of an author at peace with what he has produced in life, ready to bow out of the scene whether consciously or not. Precisely this image of Shakespeare as accepting of his condition leads Updike to write that *The Tempest* – one of Shakespeare’s last works – “is a lovingly composed late work, the roughness of its predecessor romances smoothed, their dissonances resolved in a recapitulatory and even backward-looking and abstract quality”. Even Nicholas Lazard in his review of Said’s book in an article for *The Guardian* affirms that Shakespeare’s last work “radiates – and may even generate – calm acceptance of the passage of time” (Lazard, *TheGuardian.com*).

On the contrary, awareness of the past and of the frightening lack of a future – due to advanced age, poor health, etc. – can lead authors to search for a way to rebel against the passing of time, against a present that they do not seem to belong to with their backward-looking works. That is the case, for example, of Hawthorne’s last years, spent railing against his incapacity to finish his last work because of his declining physical and mental health.

In his analysis, Said pays particular attention to Beethoven’s late style, often quoting the work done by German academic Theodore Adorno who first wrote about Beethoven’s last compositions in the context of late style. What captures both Said and Adorno’s attention is the way Beethoven’s last pieces seem to display disharmony with his time, a purposefully and previously unknown difficulty of execution that resembles chaos, a defiance of classic composition style, all this while proposing again elements from previous compositions all meshed together. A recapitulatory quality that, unlike Shakespeare’s, does not bespeak acceptance and peacefulness in the face of passing times, but stubbornness and tension. A negativity that becomes characteristic of Beethoven’s late works.

In a similar manner, though perhaps less defiantly than Beethoven, Stravinsky and Strauss created their own way to deal with a present they feel detached from, as they are getting closer and closer to their end. If Stravinsky “in completely avoiding the conventions of nineteenth-century opera, [...] accentuates the contemporaneity of his work, calling attention to the artifice, mannerism, and capriciousness of a style that he created for dealing with the past” (Said 35) opens the past as a renewed source of creative impulse, Strauss opts instead for a more aggressive retreat “into an elusive mix of eighteenth-century instrumentation and deceptively simple and rarified chamber expression designed to outrage his avant-garde contemporaries as much as his local and by-now-uninteresting audiences” (Said 93).

No matter the artist’s relationship with his past, the common thread that connects artists like Beethoven, Stravinsky and Strauss, is that it does not matter whether one seeks to shy away from the knowledge that one’s best years are now gone never to come back, or whether one accepts the natural passing of time and feels at peace with it. The one and only truth is that we cannot escape from our

past, we cannot ignore it, and we cannot pretend that the experiences we live through in our life do not shape the person we are at the end of our years.

Exactly this knowledge is what makes Lampedusa's one and only novel, *The Leopard*, the perfect product of a man close to the end of his life, aware of being alive during the moment of transition from a lingering and decadent old aristocratic order in Sicily, and the coming of a new society with new values and laws. *The Leopard* is the embodiment of Lampedusa's nostalgia for the past order he was born into that he sees slowly replaced by a new social order he neither understands nor appreciates. There is no hint of positivity in regard to the passing of time in this novel that speaks of "a world of great, even luxurious, but now inaccessible privilege connected with, or more accurately giving rise to, that particularly melancholy associated with senescence, loss, and death" (Said 97). And yet, there is no defiance of time in Lampedusa's words, only the quite acknowledgement that there is nothing he can do to arrest the change currently taking place, whether he believes that change to be positive or not. The only thing he can do is record his past to make it accessible to the future.

This 'presentness' of the past in everyone's life is one of the main themes that can be found in Toni Morrison's last works. Her last four novels all pay particular attention to how the protagonists live their lives heavily influenced – often times even oppressed – by the suffering and grief present in their pasts. The characters we read about all struggle with the pain – more often than not emotional rather than physical – inflicted on them by the people closest to them, mainly their mothers. We see how their lives are ruled by what happened to them, how the choices they make can all be traced back to that 'primordial wound' that shaped them as people, made them jaded and irrevocably tied to their past.

In Morrison's case, for the most part these characters do not feel nostalgic, or melancholic, when thinking about their pasts. They do not have the wish to go back to how things were because they never truly moved on from what happened to them. Even though they all work toward their futures, their thoughts always stray to past offenses, grievances and pains, never letting go of what

happened. Their whole life appears to be a reaction to that first moment of pain, their relationships with friends and loved ones all dependent on the consequences wrought by what has been done to them.

A prime example of Morrison's particular way of creating characters burdened by a past they just cannot seem to move on from is the novel she published in 2003, *Love*. Purposefully set in the 1990s, we are immediately made aware of the results of the 60s fight for integration between blacks and whites. While it is undoubtedly true that much was gained on the wake of the Civil Rights movement, L (one of the characters of whom we will never find out the true name) cannot help but feel dismayed, maybe even disgusted, by the way the new generations of African-Americans seem to have forgotten and discarded their culture and communities,

Nobody could get enough of our weather except when the cannery smell got to the beach and into the hotel. Then guests discovered what Up Beach people put up with every day and thought that was why Mr. Cosey moved his family out of the hotel and built that big house on Monarch Street. Fish odor didn't use to be all that bad a thing in these parts. [...]. But in the sixties it became a problem. A new generation of females complained about what it did to their dresses, their appetite, and their idea of romance (Morrison, *Love* 8).

It is in this setting torn between nostalgia and resentment that Heed and Christine's (the two protagonists) story takes place. The two angry old women met when they were little girls, still ignorant of the evils of the world lurking closer than they thought. Torn apart by Cosey's taking then 11-year-old Heed as his child-bride – and by May's decision to keep her daughter (Christine) as far away as possible from the girl Cosey decided to marry – they find each other bound to one another not only by the twisted bond of family, but by the hate fostered by both May and Cosey.

What makes it impossible for the two of them to ever reconcile until the very end of their lives, is the initial secret they keep from one another: when they were little girls, Cosey touched

Heed's breast through her swimsuit, leaving her understandably shocked, "the spot on her breast she didn't know she had [...] burning, tingling" (Morrison, *Love* 191). When Heed runs to Christine to confide in her and tell her what her grandfather did, she discovers her friend has puked all over her bathing suit and believes her to be nauseated by what just happened, not even capable of looking Heed in the eyes. Heed remains silent, "[Heed] can't speak, can't tell her friend what happened" (Morrison, *Love* 191). She ignores that Christine had been looking for her and accidentally saw her grandfather in her own room with his hand in his pants, and much like Heed, Christine does not say a word of explanation, "She is ashamed of her grandfather and of herself. When she went to bed that night, his shadow had booked the room" (Morrison, *Love* 192).

That first lie makes it impossible for the two of them to confront each other because the shame they both felt, a shame they could not fully comprehend being so young and innocent, combined with the hateful environment created by May around them, drives a rift between them that they cannot overcome. The love they have for each other does not vanish into nothing, it stays with them all their lives but what happened that day twists it into a codependent relationship where both Heed and Christine wish nothing more than to belong one to the other, and yet can only act spitefully toward each other, they "can see each other only as rivals – first for the man's favor, then for the man's estate" (Wyatt 102). Not even Cosey and May's death will be enough to deliver them.

May's vicious words and Cosey's conscious decision to put Heed before his granddaughter will lead Christine to believe that she has no home, no place to which to belong. All her life, she searches for someplace, somebody to belong to, ending up tying herself to men who seem carbon copies of Cosey (reminders of what her grandfather did), and getting herself evicted from all the temporary homes she thought she had found for herself.

Heed feels a morbid attachment to Cosey's family – caused by her biological family literally selling her to him, and by her profound need to be bound to Christine in any way possible. This only causes the rift between her and her friend to grow deeper and deeper as Christine perceives her attempt

to be part of the family as an attempt to push her away. Their shared past owns their present and destroys the future they could have together.

Vida, a woman who used to work at Cosey's hotel and had a front-row seat to the drama that unfolded between Heed and Christine, is likewise so focused on how things were in the past that she completely fails to pay attention to the present, confused by her grandson's behavior and admitting to not understand the new generations. More than once in the course of the story, we find her reminiscing about the good old days where she worked at Cosey's, melancholy tinging her words and making her wish she could go back to those times. When she sees a change in her grandson's behavior, she finds herself forced to ask her husband to take care of it as she is so removed from the present that she has no idea what to do to relate to her grandson now that he needs a guiding hand,

Romen's generation made her nervous. Nothing learned from her own childhood or from raising Dolly worked with them, and everywhere parents were flummoxed. These days the first thought at Christmas were the children; in her own generation they were the last. Now children wept if their birthdays weren't banquets; then the day was barely acknowledged. The hardship stories told by her parents that mesmerized and steeled her made Romen cover his mouth to disguise a yawn (Morrison, *Love* 148).

Sandler, Vida's husband, seems to be the only one capable of remembering the past without being swallowed by it. Much like Vida, he does feel nostalgic for what he considers the happiest and sweetest part of his life, but he is well aware of the fact that the past can never return, that the present is the only thing that matters. Many times, he thinks back to the moments he spent with Cosey – silent witness to the man's contradictions and faults – but he never loses himself in these memories. In fact, he is conscious of the uselessness of thinking back to the past as there really isn't much to feel nostalgic about once one stops looking at the old days through rose-tinted glasses, "What was the point in remembering the good old days as though the past was pure?" (Morrison, *Love* 147). However, even though he is capable of recognizing the mistakes of the past and Cosey's faults and

sins, he shows himself to be passive in the face of what he thinks is an unfair treatment of Heed. His wife Vida admires Cosey so much that she is completely blind to his faults, shoving the blame for what happened onto Heed, “She acted as though Heed chased and seduced a fifty-two-year-old man, older than her father” (Morrison, *Love* 147). Sanders understands how ridiculous that presumption is, but he is unwilling to disrupt the quiet of his home, preferring to leave his wife with her convictions instead of doing something as the only one who knows the truth of the past. As Jean Wyatt affirms in her book *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison’s Later Novels*, “Although Sandler’s greater knowledge is a signal that his assessment is more accurate, his skepticism does not extend to telling us what Cosey’s ‘habits’ were or to criticizing him. Instead, Sandler suspends judgment”, (107).

In the middle of all these characters, almost trapped between past, present and future, is Junior, a young woman who serves as a medium between the living and the dead. We meet her as she presents herself to Christine, stating that she has come to answer to an ad she found in the newspaper in which it was stated that help was needed at Number 1 Monarch Street. Right from the beginning, Christine recognizes a kindred spirit in this girl, as she understands that Junior is the same as her; a wanderer in search of a place to call hers. Christine sees danger in Junior’s desire to carve a place for herself in a world that does not seem to fit her, and she is not wrong in her caution. Junior’s life in the poverty stricken Settlement, a limbo-like place where nothing ever changes, where one is born poor and uneducated and dies poor and uneducated, is always present in everything she does. Junior is moved by a deep-seated fear of having to go back to life as it was in the Settlement, surrounded by a family – and the term has to be used loosely – that fought to keep her down to their level, and is willing and determined to do whatever she must to secure her place in life. As she claims her space in the lives of Heed and Christine, she begins to act as the physical instrument through which Cosey – whom she calls her Good Man – can keep on affecting the lives of the women still bound to him.

The morbid relationship she has with Cosey’s spirit, whom she sees everywhere in the house, reflects Heed’s twisted relationship with a dead husband she keeps calling Papa, just as her intention to claim the mansion for herself, stealing it from Heed, resembles Christine’s goal of securing a place

for herself. In a way, Junior is the physical manifestation of the shared past between Christine and Heed – in her intent she is hostile to both of them – just as much as she is the representation of the rift between the two of them caused by Cosey’s actions. She is a past made present that, in her desperate attempt to secure her future, cannot help but harm the people around her, destroying the relationships she could have forged – Romen could be Junior’s salvation if she allowed him to be – and turning all her efforts to reach stability into nothing.

Quite different is May’s situation when it comes to dealing with the passing of time. Since the moment she has become part of Cosey’s family by marrying his son, May’s one and only concern is the managing of Cosey’s hotel as well as making herself useful to her husband and, upon his death, to her father-in-law. May’s blind loyalty to Cosey and to the hotel resists even Cosey’s outrageous decision to marry an eleven-year-old girl, her daughter’s best friend, as she, much like Vida, puts the blame of what is happening to her family on Heed as if she was the one responsible for the decay of the hotel. In her endless fight to defend what she deems to be hers, she twists the innocent love existing between Heed and her daughter into a horrible mass of blame, shame, and righteous anger, dooming the two young women to a life of petty revenges, chaining them to a past she won’t allow them to shake off.

What truly defines this character, however, is her vain effort to stave off the progress of time. After Cosey’s death, she takes it upon herself to keep the hotel in good working conditions, blatantly defying Heed in everything she does, unwilling to give up her right of ownership over what remained of Cosey. During the 60s and the 70s when the African-American community marches toward equality, May will literally take up arms against what she believes to be a throng of blacks that will destroy a life’s work in their so-called revolution.

And yet the decay and then the disappearance of places such as Cosey’s Hotel – vacationing spots made by African-Americans for African-Americans of a certain social status – could not have been stopped, it was a natural casualty of the unrelenting march of time.

The threat to the hotel that May could feel in her bones, the not completely wrong conviction that “civil rights destroyed her family and its business. By which she meant colored people were more interested in blowing up cities than dancing by the seashore” (Morrison, *Love* 8), is ultimately nothing more than the passing of time and the changes it brought with it. May fails to realize this, enslaved as she is by the hotel she refuses to give up on, and in the end fights a useless battle that not only jeopardizes and already strained relationship with her daughter, but leads her down a path of madness only to end up being taken care of in her last years by the one woman she hates more than anything, Heed.

Different and yet quite similar in many ways is the situation of the women in Morrison’s 2008 book, *A Mercy*. Set in the 1600s, at the beginning of what will then become the massive system of slavery in the United States, *A Mercy* tells us the story of four women who, much like in *Love*, are shaped by a great trauma which happened in their past when they were no more than little girls. All of them are connected through the life of Jacob Vaark, a young and resourceful merchant who, and here we can appreciate Morrison’s nod toward Faulkner, is doomed by his own disproportionate ambition.

After his death, the world of these four women crumbles in different ways. Rebekka loses the husband she so dearly loved and who was her rock in the New World. Florens, sent away to find the man who could cure Rebekka – fallen ill like her husband – will be forced to face the tragic reality of who she is, a slave. Lina loses Florens, whom she thought of as a daughter, becoming untethered, uncaring of the world around her. Sorrow will find herself in her daughter but at the cost of self-exiling herself, creating a distance between herself and the rest of the world that cannot be bridged.

The book takes the form of a confession with the narrator addressing an ambiguous “you” that could refer to us readers or to another character within the story. We do not know specifically who is addressing us, but we know the narrator is a woman. In this brief prologue, the first person narrator, informs us of what happened in the course of her life, how she came to feel the need to write down her story as a confession of what she has done, but perhaps also as a way to exorcise her past.

It is in this way that we come to know Florens', the narrator, as we will soon find out, childhood trauma. When she was a little girl, her master found himself forced to give away one of his slaves as compensation for a debt contracted with a merchant by the name of Jacob Vaark. Although reluctant, Jacob accepts this method of payment and demands Florens' mother as compensation. The master, who we find out had an affair with this slave, refuses, but when Jacob insists, it is Florens' mother who begs him to take her daughter in her place. What her mother does in begging Vaark to take Florens with him instead of herself, is not the rejection Florens believes it to be, but a mercy, the only way her mother has of protecting her from the master; it is, in fact, the mercy that gives the book its title, "There is no protection but there is difference. [...]. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 166-167). For all her life, Florens will remember the way her mother hugged her little brother close to her chest while giving her up to another master, resulting in her developing a pathological fear of mothers with their babies,

[...] I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand (Morrison, *A Mercy* 8),

and deeply rooted abandonment issues that lead her to an obsessive search for someone who will serve as a grounding force for her in a world that is far too transitory.

Toni Morrison does a marvelous job of portraying Florens' all-encompassing need to find her rock, a blacksmith whose name we will not learn, showing us a woman that in all the chapters narrated by her in first person, is in the process of making her way from Vaark's farm to the place where the blacksmith lives. Although she has been sent by Rebekka, her mistress, to fetch the blacksmith as he is the only one who could possibly cure her of the same illness which took her husband, it is clear that

Florens' one true desire is to find her lover and remain with him, as he is her entire world, "Sudden a sheet of sparrows falls from the sky and settles in the trees. [...]. Lina points. We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us. Sudden and silent the sparrows are gone. I am not understanding Lina. You are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 71).

Although Florens often speaks of things happening in the past, telling us readers of moments she spent with the blacksmith or the other women of the farm, she "is incapable of using the past tense; thus everything is reduced to present tense" (Wyatt 137). Of course, as Florens has no formal education, her sentences are regularly marked by grammatical mistakes, but from what she herself tells us, she learned how to read and write through a rudimentary study of the Bible taught by a Father in the plantation where she used to live. Her using the present tense becomes then significant, as it seems the result of a choice instead of a mistake. The fact that she never uses the past tense is indication of how she never truly moves past it, always reliving her trauma.

This attachment to her past, that she lives "absolutely in the present" (Wyatt 135), not only prevents her from thinking clearly about her present, it also destroys the mutually beneficial relationship she managed to build with Lina. Furthermore, it dooms what could have happened between her and the blacksmith; when she reaches him at the end of her journey, she discovers that he has taken in a little boy whom he leaves in her care while he goes to Rebekka. "To give loving care to the blacksmith's charge would be a way to foster the blacksmith's gratitude, admiration, and love and thus move toward her goal of permanent union with him" (Wyatt 133), but face to face with her greatest fear – a little boy who has taken her place in the blacksmith's life – Florens cannot help but let history repeat itself. This time, however, she is confronted with the harsh words of the blacksmith who forces her to recognize things as they are,

Let me explain. No. Now. Why? Why? Because you are a slave. What? You heard me.  
Sir makes me that. I don't mean him. Then who? You. What is your meaning? I am a

slave because Sir trades for me. No. you have become one. How? Your head is empty and your body is wild. I am adoring you. And a slave to that too. You alone own me. Own yourself, woman, and leave us be (Morrison, *A Mercy* 141).

she reacts by attacking him – maybe even killing him – before leaving to go back to the farm, the only ‘home’ she has left, and to the broken women who still live there.

Among them is Lina, a Native-American woman who lost her entire village, but a couple of children, to a pestilence. Rescued by European soldiers, she is given to a Presbyterian couple who named her Messalina, marking her as a hopeless being, but calling her with a shortened version, Lina, meant to signify their decision to hope beyond hope that a savage like her could be saved.

The loss of her village does not simply mean that she has lost her family, making her an orphan just like all the other characters in the story, it also means that she has lost her entire world, her cultural heritage. She is too young to remember what has been taught her, all the rites, traditions, and stories, so she feels untethered, as if she does not belong in the world of the Presbyterian couple.

Her life with Jacob Vaark after she is sent away by the Presbyterians, offers her the first hint of belonging upon which she founds her entire existence; her identity is defined by the life she has with and thanks to Jacob Vaark and Rebekka, “She placed it within the mittened hands, certain now that her mistress will die. And the certainty was a kind of death for herself as well, since her own life, everything, depended on Mistress’ survival, which depended on Florens’ success” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 59-60).

She discards her past, “Solitude, regret, and fury would have broken her had she not erased those six years preceding the death of the world,” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 50) and keeps only those things she deems useful, meshing the native rituals, the knowledge she remembers, and European notions, effectively reinventing herself.

And yet, she is still irrevocably tied to her past. Her lack of family, of a people with whom to reveal herself and her knowledge is what makes the love she feels for Florens so powerful. Seeing in

Florens the daughter she never had, Lina shows herself to her, cautions her against the blacksmith with almost prophetic accuracy, “Listen to me, she is saying. I am your age when flesh is my only hunger. Men have two hungers. The beak that grooms also bites. Tell me, she says, what will it be when his work here is done. I wonder she says will he take you with him?” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 105) She shows herself to be extremely protective of Florens, keep Sorrow as far away from her as possible, “Lina was simply wary of anyone who came between herself and Florens” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 131), forming a bond with the younger woman that will leave her crippled when Florens no longer needs her. In the end, Lina is not so different from Florens, searching for someone who will define her and give her a sense of stability, in a world that keeps changing around her.

Much like Lina, Rebekka, Jacob’s wife, loses her family and her world while still quite young, although the circumstances of such losses are completely different. Born in an extremely religious family, Rebekka’s childhood is marked by her parents’ harsh treatment, public executions of criminals that left her practically indifferent to displays of violence or death, and the growing condescension from the brothers she practically raised. She is quick to grow into a woman with a rather bleak mentality when it comes to her future, looking at the world she lives in with little to no hope for herself. At a certain point she was taken to be trained as a domestic, but when the owner of the place that accepted her revealed himself to be a violent man, she ran away after only four days never to receive such offers of employment again. That is until her father came to know of “a man looking for a strong wife rather than a dowry” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 77), and although Rebekka is well aware of what her possible futures can be, she accepts the offer as that chance could be,

The one where she might have children and therefore be guaranteed some affection. As with any future available to her, it depended on the character of the man in charge. Hence marriage to an unknown husband in a far-off land had distinct advantages: separation from a mother [...]; from male siblings [...]; escape from the leers and rude hands of any man (Morrison, *A Mercy* 78).

It turns out that, luck is on her side since her marriage to Jacob is a successful one, as he, unlike her parents, does not care much for religion and is searching for a wife that will work on the farm with him, not a submitted wife.

The New World seems to her the true beginning of a new life, far from her parents' oppression. Off to a rocky start, Rebekka forms a strong and mutually supportive relationship with Lina; both hard-working women know that they cannot fight each other surrounded as they are by more than enough dangers already, "the animosity, utterly useless in the wild, died in the womb" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 53).

The death of every child she gave birth to is the only shadow darkening her new life. Still, even though the death of her children leaves her unbelievably wounded and, in some ways, diminished, Rebekka is shown to be able to live in peace even if only with Jacob. Unlike Lina and Florens, who cling to their past thus jeopardizing their future, Rebekka actively works for her future, and yet, in the end, she cannot escape from her past. She willingly left England to look for a chance at a new life, yet she never managed to have a family of her own, nor did she succeed in stopping her husband when she noticed him falling prey of his own ambition. The pain and misery she had hoped to escape followed her to America, leaving her permanently scarred both inside and outside.

Sorrow, the last of the four women living at Vaark's farm, is probably the most peculiar character of all, in that we know very little about her past. Although the loss of her father and the crew that served as a family of sorts is certainly a trauma, Sorrow does not seem overly troubled by what happened. What is peculiar, though, is the way in which, in a certain way, she keeps her past tucked away within her own mind in the form of a voice only she can hear and that she names Twin as it sounds exactly like her voice.

After the shipwreck that killed everyone she knows, an old couple who finds her and chooses to keep her as a slave. Sorrow immediately shows a complete lack of skills and will to learn, preferring to wander aimlessly through her days, without accomplishing anything. When she remains pregnant, the couple decides to give her away to Jacob who was passing by, not considering her worth the

trouble anymore. At the farm, she keeps displaying a frightening lack of useful skills and incurs in Lina's immediate distrust. The Native-American woman sees her as a bad influence over the farm, and goes as far as killing her baby to prevent her wickedness from spreading. Throughout all this time, she keeps hearing Twin's voice in her head, keeping her company – a veritable safety as well as a sort of entertainment.

After Vaark's death, she prepares herself to give birth to another baby, possibly Vaark's, far away from Lina. It is thanks to this baby, whom she names Complete as a mark of what this birth makes her feel, Twin's voice disappears. However, even though Sorrow claims to be complete in the love she found for her daughter, one cannot help but wonder if Sorrow truly is complete, or if she is just deluding herself. At the end of the book, Sorrow has completely isolated herself, and by extension, her baby, from the rest of the farm, almost from the rest of the world one could say. Considering the treatment Lina and Rebekka reserved her, it does not seem such a monumental change from the way things were before. Still, it does seem as though Sorrow, through her self-exile, is trying to go back to the way things were before she was forced to leave the limited world of the ship she called home. If that is the case, even though she no longer hears Twin's voice – a constant reminder of all she has lost since the day of the shipwreck – Sorrow has not truly moved on from her past, but has instead tried to recreate her previous, safer, life.

Morrison's 2012 novel, *Home*, is yet another example of how our past, what people said to us, how we were treated, what we have done, shapes us in different, yet nonetheless devastating ways. The plot of the novel is uncharacteristically simple compared to Morrison's previous books, and unlike the three other novels which are the focus of the present work, the characters in it are not so much shaped by a specific trauma that happened in their past, but rather by one that happened during their adulthood.

The main plot revolves around a veteran of the Korean War, who recently came back home suffering from a severe case of PTSD that landed him in a mental hospital at the beginning of the

story. After he escapes, we learn that he is currently traveling to Georgia prompted by a letter he received from a certain Sarah, stating that his sister, Cee, will die soon if he does not go rescue her.

Right from the very first pages, we are aware of Frank's struggle with his PTSD and his impossibility to move on from what happened while he was fighting in the war, "Everything reminded him of something loaded with pain. [...]. What about the ocean on a cloudy day seen from the deck of a troopship – no horizon or hope of one? No. Not that, because among the bodies kept cool below some, maybe, were his homeboys" (*Home* 8). With everything reminding him of something traumatic, Frank is literally stuck in his past most of the time. As is revealed later in the book, he spent his days doing nothing, incapable of keeping a job for long, sometimes lost in his own mind. The only thing that succeeds in shaking him from his stupor is the knowledge that his sister needs him. Even this need to protect Cee, however, apart from being a more than reasonable response to a sibling in danger, represents for him a way to go back to much simpler times, when he protected his sister as they were children. The horrors he has seen in Korea and that haunt him, are what prevent him from truly going home, when all his childhood friends have died. Furthermore, in Korea, Frank committed what to him is the one crime he can never atone for; he killed a little girl who had offered him sexual services in exchange for food. For just a moment, Frank had been tempted to accept, but then, disgusted by himself, he shot the little girl to hide all evidence of his temptation and depravity. Saving Cee without resorting to violence becomes then the one way he has to try and fix the mistake he made.

As Muyumba correctly states in his review of the novel, "Frank is motivated by love's primal desire – to protect" (Muyumba, *TheAtlantic.com*). This desire to protect his sister and shelter her from everything, however, is exactly what caused endless problems to Cee in the first place. Feeling unwanted and unloved from birth, because of her grandmother Lenore's marking her as bad news for the fact that she was born in the streets, Cee clings to her brother for protection in every aspect of her life. Their parents being busy all day long with their jobs to provide for their children, leave Frank as the one truly in charge of raising Cee; Lenore is completely disinterested in the girl except for when

she feels like belittling her, and Salem, Cee's grandfather, simply does not care enough to intervene. Frank acts as her shield against anything potentially dangerous, from men who seek to assault her,

She looked up and saw Frank leaving the plate with his bat, only because the others were yelling. [...]. He walked slowly away from the field and disappeared into the surrounding trees. Circling, she later learned. Suddenly he was behind the tree she was leaning against, swinging his bat twice into the legs of a man she had not even noticed standing behind her. [...]. Hours later, Frank explained. The man wasn't from Lotus, he told her, and had been hiding behind the tree, flashing her. When she pressed her brother to define 'flashing', and he did so, Cee began to tremble (Morrison, *Home* 51).

to verbal and emotional abuse from her grandmother.

The problem with Frank's behavior does not reside in him taking care of his sister more like a father than a brother; the problem stems from the fact that he does not allow Cee to grow from personal experience. Whenever something wrong happens, Cee seeks refuge in her brother, which prevents her from developing her own coping mechanisms to deal with life's problems. Of course, this complete dependence on her brother results in disaster as soon as Frank enlists in the army, leaving Cee with no one to protect her. Cee is completely unequipped to deal with life without her brother and that is evident in her immediate attempt to find someone else to fill the void left by her brother. She lets an older boy seduce and marry her, going so far as convincing Lenore to lend them her car while they moved to Atlanta. Soon enough, however, to no one's surprise, Cee's husband abandons her in the city, running away with Lenore's car. Having no intention of going back home just to confirm what Lenore had been saying since her birth, Cee remains in Atlanta, struggling to survive. The need for a job pushes her to accept a job that will change her permanently.

Because of her naiveté and lack of real life experience, Cee does not realize that the white doctor who hired her is using her as a research subject for his illegal experimentations. Although the clues as to what the doctor is doing and what the consequences of his actions will be are right in front of

her, and our, eyes – “Since the doctor’s bookshelves are full of books on eugenics, [...] his ‘examinations’ of Cee while she is sedated deprive her of the capacity to have children, we can deduce that he is tampering with black reproduction directly” (Wyatt 157) –, she does not understand what is happening until after her brother has already rescued her. Even then, she initially ascribes her misfortune to her lack of education instead of facing the reality of her situation.

The burden of self-deprecation and worthlessness that she feels because of Lenore’s words, however, is not something she can realistically abandon in a short period of time. When she was little, Lenore’s words were certainly hurtful, but Frank’s presence did much to keep her from letting them take root inside of her. Without Frank by her side, Cee is left with nothing but the heavy burden of her past weighting her down. Her lack of a proper education does indeed put her at a disadvantage, but, as she realizes herself, not being academically educated does not imply that she has no way of taking care of herself in life. The only thing that keeps hindering her is her past of verbal abuse and the instinct to lean on her brother and follow his commands without even thinking about it, “That’s the other side, she thought, of having a smart, tough brother close at hand to take care of and protect you – you are slow to develop your own brain muscle” (Morrison, *Home* 48).

The two other women in the novel, Lenore and Lily, a woman with whom Frank has a brief relationship that reaches its end when he receives Sarah’s letter, are both weighted down one by a past of death, the other by one of rejection.

We discover that Lenore had been married already once before she settled down with Salem, and that her first husband – a man she seemed to truly love, especially when compared with her relationship with Salem – was a moderately rich man who owned a service station. According to Lenore’s own words, the fact that he was somewhat rich actually played a not so small part in her love for him, “Lenore sighed and tried not to compare Salem with her first husband. My, my, what a sweet man, she thought. Not just caring, energetic and a good Christian, but a moneymaker too” (Morrison, *Home* 86).

Unfortunately, Lenore's first husband was murdered exactly because of his wealth, and the man responsible for the crime was obviously never found as the police had much urgent things to do during the Depression. The brutal crime and the note the murderer left with the body ordering Lenore to leave town immediately, obviously shocked her. Even after settling in the small town of Lotus, and living for a while in peace with no one stirring trouble around her, Lenore did not feel safe living alone.

This lingering terror stemming from the violence of her husband's death – a violent act that hit her when she felt most safe – is what prompts her to marry a widower like Salem, who could provide her with a sense of safety with his silent companionship. The terror she keeps clinging on, this knowledge that she could lose everything she has without a moment's notice, is probably what causes her to behave with hostility when Frank and Cee's parents ask Salem to let them stay at Lenore's house after they have been sent away from their homes.

Lenore's not completely irrational fear does not allow her to just accept these people – who in a way are taking control of what is hers with just their presence – and so, knowing she cannot say anything to Salem's family, she unloads her frustration on Cee. But this unshakable fear is not a hinder only when it comes to forging relationships with her family, it also causes her to be alienated in the small town where everyone, although always showing her unwavering kindness, cannot stand her attitude which looks as superiority in their eyes.

Lily, on the other hand, is burdened by a past she undoubtedly shares with countless others African-Americans, a past no less horrible than Cee's or Frank's. When she had contacted a real estate agent to leave a down payment on a house of her own, the woman from the agency informed her that the house could not be sold to anyone of African descent. From that moment on, that memory of rejection of who she was, shaped Lily in everything she did. When informed that there are other apartments that she could buy, "She raised her chin and left the office as quickly as pride let her" (Morrison, *Home* 73), yet "She still wanted to buy that house, or one like it" (Morrison, *Home* 74).

Being with Frank somewhat calmed her in her rage, but the thought, the humiliation, of having the chance of buying a house all to herself stripped from her, never leaves her mind. However, it does not take long for her comfortable relationship with Frank to fall apart. At the beginning, Lily is not bothered by the obvious problems Frank manifests because of his time in Korea – and if she is bothered, she does not show it outwardly –, but that understanding soon turns into annoyance, even embarrassment,

They had been standing at a table [...] when a little girl with slanty eyes reached up over the opposite edge of the table to grab a cupcake. Frank leaned over to push the platter closer to her. When she gave him a broad smile of thanks, he dropped his food and ran through the crowd. [...]. Alarmed and embarrassed, Lily put down her paper plate. Trying hard to pretend he was a stranger to her, she walked slowly, her chin up, making no eye contact, past the bleachers and away from the exit Frank had taken (Morrison, *Home* 76-77),

and unfulfilled by a relationship that keeps her from actually reaching for her dream of a house – a dream that Frank does not share. When Frank tells her he has to leave, she does not stop him and is actually secretly relieved that she won't have to take care of him anymore. The moment when she finds a wallet full of money and, after some hesitation, decides to take it without looking for its owner is rather significant. When she goes back home “In Frank Money's empty space real money glittered” (Morrison, *Home* 81), signifying her single-minded focus toward her dream.

The memory of the past is of course a central theme in *God Help the Child* as well. Each character is haunted, since childhood, by a specific memory that shapes his/her entire life. Specific memories, typically a veritable trauma, rule over the characters' lives, limiting the actions they are willing to take and compromising their relationships.

In Bride's case, what shapes the woman she has become, are fundamentally two things: the lack of affection, both physical and verbal, from her mother, and witnessing a man sexually abusing

a little boy. Because of the color of her blue-black skin, which to her mother, a light-skinned African-American, appears as something frightening and horrifying, Bride lives a childhood defined by the complete absence of love from Sweetness.

Many times in the middle of the narration, Bride is swept away by memories of the way her mother treated her; what she remembers, most of the time, is how Sweetness looked at her, how she tried to avoid contact with her skin at all costs, “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” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 31).

This feeling of being unworthy accompanies her her whole life. As an adult, there is in her the constant need to prove herself, to always be perfect, while feeling as if she is the exact opposite of all that. Bride has the constant fear of going back to being the scared little girl afraid of everything, that accepted punishments and never strived for more, “When fear rules, obedience is the only survival choice. And I was good at it. I behaved and behaved and behaved” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 31-32).

This past of physical and verbal abuse has of course made her incapable of having meaningful relationships with others, be they romantic or platonic. The only friend of hers we meet is Brooklyn immediately sets out to steal Bride’s job from under her nose as soon as the chance presents itself. The only romantic relationship she has is the one with Booker which comes to an end because of the one secret she kept from him: she intends to go see a woman being released out of jail after 15 years on the charges of sexual abuse of children.

I mentioned how one of the two things which shape Bride growing up is witnessing a boy being sexually assaulted; her tie to Sofia, the woman being released from jail, stems from this singular moment. After witnessing that scene, what Bride remembers is how furious Sweetness had been, not because of a child being hurt, but because the man abusing that child was their landlord and Sweetness did not want to lose their home by reporting what had happened.

For this reason, years later, when the case of a teacher possibly abusing her students becomes public, Bride does not hesitate to swear the false in court and accuse Sofia of being the monster everyone considered her to be even though she was not. Why did Bride decide to do that to an innocent woman? Because she craved her mother's approval. In court, the only thing she remembers is Sweetness' eyes on her. Outside the court, the only thing that mattered in the middle of all the parents congratulating her for her testimony, was her mother smiling at her, holding her hand, "Outside the courtroom all the mothers smiled at me, and two actually touched and hugged me. Fathers gave me thumbs-up. Best of all was Sweetness. As we walked down the court-house steps she held my hand, my hand" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 31).

Even though to her child's mind what she was doing was not so bad, Bride is haunted all her life by what she has done – the evidence of this is in the fact that she planned to go see Sofia for years. This false testimony is what, in the end, puts an end to her relationship with Booker: given Booker's brother has been killed by a pedophile, he cannot stand the thought of Bride helping someone who, to the public, has been found guilty of sexual abuse on children.

Booker leaving literally sends Bride back to being the little girl she used to be – her body starts regressing, bringing her back to the state she was in when she committed the horrible mistake that keeps haunting her. Even though, in the end, Bride makes peace with what she has done, confronting Booker and finally admitting to someone, and to herself, the truth, there is the uncomfortable feeling that she will never be able to move past the damage her mother has done to her.

The end of the novel for Bride – before the very last chapter told by Sweetness – ends on an ominous note with the following paragraph, "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" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 175), referred to Bride and Booker's hope for the future represented by their coming child, that perhaps foreshadows a past

doomed to either repeat itself with this child, or to keep influencing the lives of both Bride and Booker, therefore the life of their child.

In this regard, Booker's life has made him not so different from Bride. First having to bear the disappearance of his brother Adam for months, the slow and steady encroaching of melancholy and tragedy in his family life, and then the final blow of his brother's gruesome death, have made of Booker a closed-off man who only sees the worst in the world around him.

The death of a brother is of course a tragedy that rocks the entire family, but to Booker, Adam was more than just a brother, "Adam was more than a brother to Booker, more than the 'A' of parents who'd named their children alphabetically" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 115-116). Adam was his firm point, the steady presence that gave order and meaning to his life. The one person who knew everything about him and loved him more than anyone else. Without him, Booker does not know what he is supposed to do, nor does he know how to cope with this sudden disappearance made all the more destabilizing by the way Adam was killed.

The way his family ignores his cries for help – wanting to set up a scholarship in Adam's name, taking up the trumpet, ignores too his rage at finding his brother's room cleared of his things – while understandable because of their grief, does not help Booker's situation. Because of this, it is inevitable that when Aunt Queen encourages him to hold on to Adam, instead of understanding her words for what they meant, 'Take your time mourning and then let him go', Booker makes Adam's death his life.

As a consequence, Booker's life remains stuck in the moment of his brother's death, giving him a false sense of balance in life that keeps him away from others. Even though, when the identity of the man who kills his brother is revealed, Booker envisions justice as the killer having to haul the bodies of his victims on his back for his whole life, he is "the one who ends up carrying Adam's killing like a cumbersome load" (Muyumba, *TheAtlantic.com*). Booker is incapable of forming attachments with other people – romantic or otherwise – because, much like Bride, he has not stopped living in the past. The childhood trauma he suffered is something that he keeps reliving every time

he sees a child in danger, “It was the lip-licking that got to him – the tongue grazing the upper lip, the swallowing before its return to grazing. [...]. Booker’s fist was in the man’s mouth before thinking about it” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 109) – in this he is not unlike Frank Money who literally relives past traumatic events through his unpredictable flashbacks.

The relationship he has with Bride, though comfortable for him, is a one-way street where he does not share anything of his past. Furthermore, Bride’s total lack of curiosity regarding Booker’s past does nothing but allow him “to maintain intact the space of an internal world wholly dedicated to the dead” (Wyatt 179). It is this lack of communication and, I would say, unwillingness to listen and understand on his part, that causes its collapse. His natural reaction at that point, is to retreat back to the town where his Aunt lives, and probably keep on living his life as he has done up to that point; with no objective and no goal.

The one difference between Bride and Booker, is that at no point does Booker show that he is willing to at least try to deal with his past, unlike Bride who, although misguided in her attempts, wants to stop living in the past. Were it not for Bride following him home and forcing him to listen to her, Booker would have never even considered that perhaps he was not living his life in a healthy way. Furthermore, Bride’s intervention is not enough to prompt his action, as it is Aunt Queen, the one who unknowingly set him on this course, who truly pushes him to change – “with a few wisely chosen words she manages to persuade Booker to abandon his decade-long dedication to his dead brother” (Wyatt 177) –, her death after being saved by him and Bride, a sign of the severance of his last tie to his past.

Yet, as I was saying in reference to Bride, we have no way of knowing whether Booker truly wants to move forward with his life with Bride, or not. While we know that Bride seems happy and ready to have a child – as she writes to Sweetness –, Booker simply disappears from the narration, making it impossible for us to know what will become of him.

## Chapter 1.2

Because late style is so concerned with the past, with regrets, failures, and frustrations with one's inability to change what has already been, one of its obvious traits is the impossibility of building a future for oneself. Late style presupposes an obsessive and alienating focus on the past as, being at the end of one's life, it is inconceivable to ponder on the hope for a future that cannot stand on the past's shaky grounds.

In Adorno's words, "Lateness is the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal [...] it includes the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend it or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness. There is no transcendence or unity" (Said 13). In other words, the artist finds himself oddly disjoined from time; he lives in the present, but his focus is so completely on the past that he cannot do anything about his future.

As I remarked in the previous chapter, some artists, like Hawthorne, feel as though they are trapped because of the way others see them and their work as consistent in quality and form. In this case, the artist cannot help but feel frustrated by his inability to change and that frustration will inevitably bleed into his works, generating intricate, uncooperative, non-serene, and tension-filled pieces that will unsettle the readers.

Lack of a future does not mean simply that there will be nothing more in one's life, but that there cannot be closure – 'closure' here meaning a definitive and final separation from one's past brought about by its acceptance and by having made peace with it. No matter what one wishes, one's focus on the past with its nostalgia for what has been and never will be again and its frustration with what one can no longer hope to change, precludes the possibility of coming to terms with one's life, keeping serenity out of reach.

Beethoven's last works are a perfect example of the tension and disharmony present within an artist and then poured into his works. Compared to his previous pieces, whole and serene,

Beethoven's last works appear unfinished in their difficulty, in their apparent destruction of any solid ground. According to Adorno, "As an older man facing death, Beethoven realizes that his work proclaims [...] that no synthesis is conceivable [but is in effect] the remains of a synthesis, the vestige of an individual human subject sorely aware of the wholeness, and consequently survival, that has eluded it forever" (Said 10-11).

Far more direct in his denunciation that there is no future, in his complete focus on the past resulting in self-exile on his part, is the Greek-Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy. In his poetry, which focuses on places and characters in various moments of their life, Cavafy treats the present as a mere transition from the past, and the past itself as a moment that has to be preserved before it gets swallowed by history. In Cavafy "the future does not occur" (Said 145); better to have extremely limited hopes than grandiose projects that, as seen from the past, are constantly betrayed.

Similar in his willing ignorance of the future is Mozart in one of his last pieces *Così Fan Tutte*. Heavily influenced by his personal situation with his wife – her inconsiderate flirting with other men pushed Mozart to write her a letter about it – and by feelings of restlessness within himself that left him feeling as though "everything is cold – cold as ice" (Said 61), and "everything is so empty" (Said 61), one of the main motifs of *Così Fan Tutte* is "the elimination of memory so that only the present is left standing" (Said 66).

While Toni Morrison certainly does not 'negate' the future, as I have already remarked in the first chapter, her novels focus on the past and on its present consequences. It is certainly true that the past, in shaping who Morrison's characters are, heavily influences their future and, in a certain way, allows us to somewhat accurately predict these characters' future, or lack thereof, based on their inability to accept what has happened to them. But as I said, this is only something that us readers can wonder about, it's something Morrison puts us in the condition of doing through her wonderful creation of characters who, for all their fleshed out pasts and motivations, might as well be real. However, Morrison's focus is and remains on the present in which these characters have to deal with their pasts, never on their future, which she never reveals to us. Morrison's latest four novels all finish

with an open ending, never revealing to us whether the characters were successful in their will to change or not, always ending right when their new life is about to start.

Morrison's choice of ending the novels in such a way is, in my opinion, a conscious decision to underline one of the central themes in these novels: there can be no future, no hope for something better, if the past is not dealt with and laid to rest once and for all. Ending the novels right when the characters have reached this very same conclusion, highlights that simply choosing to confront one's past does not guarantee anything will change; it is a conscious and prolonged effort, stretching into the future that will produce true change. There can be no closure, thus no future, unless one is committed to change.

As seen in the previous chapter, *Love* is filled with characters who seem incapable of letting go of their past. These same characters, at the same time, are perfect examples of how one's future is made impossible by their unwillingness to search for some sort of closure with what happened in the past. Whether these characters blatantly refuse to come to terms with what happened or simply ignored that there was anything wrong with them at all, they all meet their fate because they remain anchored to days now gone.

Right at the beginning, we are immediately shown L's disgust with new generations and with the way things are evolving not only in their town, but in the country in more general terms. Unlike May's, hers is a passive resistance to the passing of time, a silent judgment that she keeps private in the safe space of her mind. L tells us immediately how she used to speak her mind, and how she felt she had to fall into silence as the world around her started to degenerate, "Back in the seventies, when women began to straddle chairs and dance crotch out on television, when all the magazines started featuring behinds and inner thighs as though that's all there is to a woman, well, I shut up altogether" (Morrison, *Love* 3).

As we read on, we see that this silence is not a result only of what happened in the last few years; it is something which began while she was still working at Cosey's Hotel. I think it is significant that the only time we hear L's voice is in the chapters dedicated to her telling us how

things evolved between Heed and Christine. In the rest of the novel, even when she appears in another character's memory, she never says a word. Up until the very end, she acts as a mere witness to the story unfolding before her eyes. She offers her judgment of everyone involved in the drama unfolding in the hotel, but she is always detached, removed from the situation.

Until the end, when we readers are finally aware of everyone's faults, L fails to recognize her own failings when it comes to Heed and Christine's tragic life. Many times, she could have intervened to save the girls, yet the only time she did something was when Cosey raised his hands against Heed, warning him never to do something like that again,

I saw what Mr. Cosey did to Heed at the birthday dinner. My heart reached out to her and I let him know it. While he fumbled for something in his pocket and May and Christine were waiting in the car, I tapped him on the shoulder. "Don't you never lay a hand on her again no matter what. Do, and I am long gone" (Morrison, *Love* 140).

Even then, her action came too late. As such it is fitting that L never truly finds closure before dying, taking her failings and her blame with her as she dies. Blind to the part she played in Heed and Christine's tragedy, L never looks for closure, as she is completely unaware of even needing it. Her death is barely acknowledged in passing in a conversation, surrounded by the same silence she held and that doomed two girls she could have saved.

Completely opposite is May who loudly protests the passing of time until the day of her death. She is not much unaware of the role she has played in the story, rather she simply does not care about her fault, too busy obsessing over the hotel. Until the moment she loses her mind, and is forced to rely on Heed, and later Christine, to keep on living, May's sole concern is the fate of the hotel. She is well aware of what she is doing when she starts pitting Heed and Christine one against the other, and there is no regret to be found in her in that regard. May's closure would not be found in another person, as much as in the hotel. When she married Cosey's son, she not only submitted herself to the two Cosey men, she chained herself to the hotel. From that moment on, the hotel's fate and May's

become one. L, in her ever-present insightfulness, perfectly captures May's situations, "If I was a servant in that place, May was its slave" (Morrison, *Love* 102).

May never separates herself from the hotel; even in her madness, she remains tied to it. She cannot find her closure because from the moment of Cosey's death, she has been fighting the wrong battle while remaining convinced of doing the right thing. She thinks that stealing the hotel from Heed's hands, protecting it from the Civil Rights movement, will somehow preserve the wonderful memories of the years spent working there and the loved ones she lost, while she should have thought to free herself from it. By misinterpreting what was worth saving and what was not, May precluded herself the possibility of forging a future for herself, free from the will of a dead man and a dead husband, dependent only on her own will and decisions. As a result, she meets her end sunk beneath the weight of her own madness, taken care of by the one woman she wished to destroy.

Both of them, in different ways, cling to the past – May to what she perceives as happier days, L to traditions and communal values – in a vain attempt at stalling the future while simultaneously providing themselves with a way to define and protect themselves against abrupt changes that threaten them. Such apprehension is, of course, more than understandable especially when one considers that L and May, more than anyone else, represent that part of the African-American community that felt apprehension in the face of the Civil Rights movement, as Toni Morrison herself put it when discussing what pushed her to write *Love*,

One of the things that existed was a lot of weariness, caution, and even resistance within the black community. Before the Civil Rights movement, there was the necessity for a flourishing, black, entrepreneurial class: good schools, law schools black-only, medical schools black-only. They serviced the race. Well, once the progress was enforced, two things happened. Such people were frequently called bourgeois? Race traitors? Too many connections, you know, with the white establishment. And also, African-American could then choose, which was the whole point, where they wanted to live, where they wanted to vacation, what schools they wanted to attend. And that process of gaining fuller citizenship, and becoming Americans in that sense, and assimilating, was great and there

were also losses (Manufacturing Intellect, *Toni Morrison Interview on "Love"* (2003) 00:02:20-00:03:21).

Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the irony in L and May's destiny. In fighting so hard to preserve some semblance of future for themselves, they end up destroying it.

Heed and Christine's lack of closure – a definitive and final cut with their past – and future comes directly out of their refusal to truly talk to one another. Throughout the novel we are spectators as they fight, try to outwit one another every step of the way, and we get to learn what the reason behind the hate they apparently harbor for one another is. However, when they each feel the need to vent and unload their rage and frustration, they never confront one another preferring instead to deal with someone detached from the point of contention. In the course of the entire novel, Christine and Heed do not have a single line of dialogue between them. Even at the end, when both of them finally reach an understanding when confronted with Heed's imminent death, the words they exchange take the form of what could be called a mental communication between the fusing minds of these two women. Unlike what Jean Wyatt affirms in her book, that "because the marks of attribution are absent, it becomes difficult to discern which one of them is speaking" (Wyatt 116), thanks to Morrison's outstanding hand at characterization, we can safely attribute each sentence to one woman or the other. This continuous silence between them is what makes it impossible for them truly to find closure even after finally understanding one another.

Closure for Heed would have been to finally be accepted as Christine's family, a bond that, for better or for worse cannot be broken. Closure for Christine, instead, would have been to find again that pure love she shared with Heed as a little girl, a love that would provide her with a place where she finally belonged instead of leaving her out in the streets, alone and rejected. Heed's death, however, robs both of them of these possibilities, and even if in the end L claims to see Heed and Christine back together as they should have been all along, "I see you. You and your invisible friend

inseparable on the beach” (Morrison, *Love* 199), the image we get is that of a lost soul (Christine’s) facing the world now truly, completely, alone.

Always between these two old women, Junior appears at first to be the one character to reach her initial aim of outwitting both Cosey women to steal the property from under their noses. At first, because the open ending of the novel does not reveal what happens to Junior after Christine comes back home. Junior’s motivations are clear since the beginning; we immediately know that she comes from a place of poverty, and, thanks to Christine who recognizes her as a kindred spirit, (“Was she afraid she would blush in recognition at any moment, sharpening her voice to a razor to cut off possibility? The telltale signs of a runaway’s street life were too familiar”, Morrison, *Love* 23), we know that she is a wanderer who craves a space that will be hers and no one else’s. She has faced enough betrayal – her own family wanted to keep her down to their level – and has seen the ugliest side of the world – she is sexually harassed at Correctional – that she does not feel bad for wanting to take what is Heed and Christine’s for herself. The memory of the Settlement, of that place that nipped at the bud whatever desire to improve oneself one might have as a child, is always present in her mind. The memory of Correctional too never goes away, it is made even more pressing by the fact that it is at Correctional that Junior first ‘meets’ her Good Man.

Cosey’s spirit is a constant in Junior’s life as she goes to work for Heed. Her desire to please him and show him what a clever girl she is fuels every single action she perpetrates, from taking care of Heed to starting a sexual relationship with Romen, a young boy seen as a present to her from her Good Man, “Junior circled her gift. She looked at the shovel in his hands. Then his crotch, then his face” (Morrison, *Love* 63). All the while, Junior is sure she is working toward her goal of securing a safe space for herself, driving Heed and Christine toward their inevitable final confrontation, and making plans on how to renovate the house on Monarch Street.

Yet, right when things seem to be going her way, it all comes crashing down. Heed and Christine’s confrontation makes the Good Man disappear, leaving Junior with no force to ground her, and her ‘relationship’ with Romen reveals itself to be, on her part, deeper than she expected it to be,

prompting her to reveal what she has done, halting her own plan. Junior's single-minded focus on her future is exactly what precludes her from securing it. Closure for her would be the chance to claim a space for herself, to prove to herself that she was above the Settlement and that she would never have to go back to that place. Yet, her blind trust in the spirit of a man who turned to dust the life of all the women he touched, ultimately reveals itself to be her doom. And yet, how could it be otherwise when Junior is nothing but the sum of Heed and Christine's lives and experiences?

Much bleaker is the situation presented in *A Mercy*. Considering the historical context of the novel, it is inevitable for it to be anything but dark and twisted in happenings. The possibility of a future is automatically negated by the story being set at the beginning of slavery in the United States, but, as always with Morrison, one has to look at the characters to truly appreciate the depth of hopelessness that she presents us.

As a child born into slavery, Florens' life has already been decided for her and her future sealed without her even knowing she had one. These facts in themselves already tell us that, no matter what happens, Florens has no hope for the future, nor can she find closure, as she is part of a system that does not accord her basic human rights, thus taking from her the freedom to define herself and her life. What truly takes away from her the chance at a future – even a limited one as she can realistically have – is not slavery to her master, but her own misguided belief that she can find herself in some else.

The initial loss of motherly love and protection, marred by the memory of her mother giving her away to spare her son, robs Florens of the possibility to build an identity for herself through the fundamental relationship between mother and daughter. Even though she finds in Lina someone who can teach her how to survive in the world – responsibility that would have fallen on her mother – the relationship between them cannot compensate the bond she has lost, nor can it change how “Her misreading of her mother's message becomes the distorting lens through which she perceives the world” (Wyatt 124).

Lina, like Florens, belongs to Jacob Vaark, which puts her in a position in which she might have to choose between saving herself and saving Florens, and Florens is well aware of this. For this reason, the blacksmith, a free man who owns himself and can stand on equal grounds with Jacob and his wife, in Florens' eyes is the only one who can provide a safe and stable place for her. She is so afraid of what has happened in her past that she annuls herself, thus erasing whatever hope she could have had for herself, by making her own existence dependent on someone else. Florens cannot find closure – “It is because slaves are bought and sold that the misunderstanding between mother and daughter can never be rectified: the message that would explain the mother's actions cannot get through because, once sold, the child the child is transported away and held on the new owner's property” (Wyatt 127) – and by making herself nothing more than an appendage of the blacksmith, she forfeits her future without even trying to build one for herself.

Rebekka and Lina, similarly to Florens, cannot hope for their future because of its dependence upon a man, Jacob Vaark. Their being women in the chaotic New World, makes it unavoidable that their life depend upon Vaark. It matters little that the two women have completely different roles in Jacob's life – one a wife, the other a servant – as it is his presence that determines whether they will survive or not.

Both women lose their families when they are still quite young – Lina to an epidemic, Rebekka to her father selling her – and both are taken from their childhood world and displaced in another one they do not fully understand. The only element that allows them to live a relatively stable and safe life is Jacob's presence. However, the man himself represents their doom. Jacob's hubris in wanting so desperately to build a legacy for children he does not even have, leads to his untimely death and to the collapse of both women's life. Rebekka just like her husband, almost as if her health and being were dependent upon him, falls ill, surviving the illness only to wake up a completely different woman – closed off, religious in a way she had previously despised because of the way her dead children had been treated, owner of a farm in ruin she is no longer able or willing to work in. Lina, because of Rebekka's illness, loses Florens, the one she considered her daughter, and consequently loses her will

to keep fighting and living even in the unmerciful world she had learned how to bend. This loss is made even more poignant by the loss of the woman she considered her friend, Rebekka.

Right from the start, both Lina and Rebekka are marked by destiny. Rebekka accepted her move to the New World to build a new life for herself, only to find a nature she has to constantly fight against, the death of every single family member she had, and a religion she thought she had left behind. Lina tried to build herself a new life by blending it with her old one, only managing to make herself not belong to either one. Even the relationship she builds with Florens and the distrust she harbors for Sorrow come from the teachings she received in a life she does not belong to anymore, “By the time Sir brought Sorrow home, the resident women were a united front in dismay. To Mistress she was useless. To Lina she was bad luck in the flesh. Red hair, black teeth, recurring neck boils and a look in those over-lashed silver-gray eyes that raised Lina’s nape hair” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 54). Right from the start, neither woman could expect to find permanent closure with the past and hope for the future.

Sorrow, the only one who apparently finds closure with her past, does so at a terrible cost. Since the moment we encounter her, she is clearly described as a girl with no purpose in life. She drifts through life without truly being dependent on anyone or anything. Yet, there is need for companionship within her, the only thing that seemed to matter to her, represented by Twin’s voice inside her head, the one thing that keeps her grounded. Completely unbothered by everything that happens around her, she ends up in Jacob Vaark’s farm as the last slave he will own willingly and it is there that she seems to receive the first shock that brings her back to life, and gives her a sense of purpose. Lina’s immediate distrust of her dooms Sorrow to isolation even when she tries to get closer to the other slaves in the farm, solidifying her dependence on Twin, the only person she cares about.

When Lina kills Sorrow’s child, believing that it would bring nothing but sorrow to all of them, the belief that she can trust in no other woman is cemented in her. Jacob’s death and the chaos it unleashes upon the farm, are the perfect elements that will allow Sorrow to give birth to her daughter with the sole help of two indentured male slaves.

Her daughter's birth erases Twin's presence, signifying closure with her past, and pushes Sorrow into isolating herself completely, even refusing the help to look after her child offered by the two men who assisted her during the labor, thus anchoring herself to the present and erasing her future. This willing isolation in which she raises her daughter, puts her in the same position as Florens' mother, thus hinting at what could possibly happen in the near future if we judge things by the state of the farm these women live in, letting us know that the cycle of mothers having to abandon their daughters is far from over. Although she is referring to Florens' mother, Jean Wyatt manages to explain Sorrow's situation perfectly, "The position of slave mother thus imposes an unbearable contradiction: as a mother her most basic commitment is to the protection and preservation of her child; yet as a slave mother, she is powerless to protect a daughter whose body belongs to the slaveowner" (Wyatt 126).

The lack of hope for the future hinged upon the fact that what has happened – or has been done, in Frank's case – in the past, is a central theme in *Home*. All the characters introduced by the novel are stuck where they are in a state of forced present, some because they are too traumatized by what has befallen them and cannot find it in themselves to move past it, others because they do not believe there even is anything beyond the limited space and time allowed to them. The only option given to everyone in this novel is to go back home, back to the beginning, to a community made of people that simply have to accept you whether they like it or not.

Frank's paralyzing trauma is perhaps the easiest to understand and sympathize with because of its common occurrence in war veterans going back home, although his situation is clearly made worse by his race and by the historical context of his homecoming – pre Civil Rights America.

When we first encounter Frank, he is lying in a fake drugged sleep, intent on trying to escape from the hospital he has been taken to because of a violent episode caused by his PTSD occurred prior to the beginning of the narration. If his mental problems were not clear enough, not even two pages in, we encounter the first of many invasive flashbacks of the death of Frank's childhood friends. It is immediately established that Frank's PTSD is a link to the past that does not allow him to move

on, he cannot find closure because his trauma is constantly repeating itself in ways that paralyze him and interrupt his life, as is the case right at the beginning.

Although Frank's narrative is one of movement – from beginning to end he is constantly on the move to reach his sister and bring her home – he remains completely still when it comes to his life. This complete lack of forward-thinking – what will he do after Cee is safe, how will he live, how he plans to cope with his mental disability – is particularly evident when we reach the chapters dedicated to Frank's relationship with Lily.

As we are made aware of both of their thought processes during the time they spend living together, we are offered a full picture of Frank's situation. He projects a sense of numbness around him, while Lily is the only one who pushes him to do something by having him accompany her to social activities that she deems useful to get closer to her goal, "She knew that buried underneath the pile of complaints lay her yearning for her own house. It infuriated Lily that he shared none of her enthusiasm for achieving that goal. In fact he seemed to have no goals at all" (Morrison, *Home* 75-76). Lily, on the other hand, shows us Frank's moments of physical numbness due to PTSD induced flashbacks, added to his inability to keep a job long enough to start thinking about building a future together, "She came home from work and saw him sitting on the sofa staring at the floor. One sock on, the other in his hand. Neither calling his name nor leaning toward his face moved him. So Lily learned to let him be and flounced off to the kitchen to clean up whatever mess he'd made" (Morrison, *Home* 75).

The first time Frank shows initiative and willingness to change himself for the better is when he promises to himself that he will save Cee without resorting to violence – a natural response after years of war. He is successful in his endeavor and, one would think this moment to represent the beginning of a positive change that will allow Frank to fix his life and move forward.

However, even though Frank seems willing to come to terms with his past – he admits his sin, and then properly buries the dead man he and Cee had seen when they were kids, their first contact with death – he still does not direct a single thought to his and Cee's future, thus leaving us readers

to judge him solely based on the way he has behaved for the entire novel. Furthermore, the fact that he only admits his deepest sin – he is the one who killed the Korean girl – to the implied writer – the one he has been addressing since the beginning of the book, “Since you’re set on telling my story” (Morrison, *Home* 5); “Don’t paint me as some enthusiastic hero”, (Morrison, *Home* 84) – and to no one else, is a clear indicator of the fact that he is not truly ready or willing to solve his problems. How can there be closure when he still cannot confront himself with honesty?

In a similar way, Cee has given so much weight to her grandmother’s words on her, that she is both emotionally and physically incapable of doing anything for herself, blaming all her misfortunes to a naiveté born out of a lack of education instead of her complacency in the face of her brother’s treatment of her. Cee not only believes what Lenore always said about her – that being born in the streets marked her as something unsightly and unworthy – she has actually absorbed those words and used them as an excuse to avoid confronting the problematic state she is in because of her brother’s misguided protection, and her willingness to accept Frank’s decisions regarding her life.

Even though she is aware, to some extent, of the precarious situation she is in, in part because of Frank, it still takes the traumatizing experience of being experimented on for her to fully realize how down she has allowed herself to be pushed. It is the no nonsense attitude of the townswomen who take her in that finally “persuades Cee to give up her sense of worthlessness and take charge of her life” (Wyatt 160-161),

Although each of her nurses was markedly different from the others in looks, dress, manner of speech, food and medical preferences, their similarities were glaring. There was no excess in their gardens because they shared everything. There was no trash or garbage in their homes because they had a use for everything. They took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them. The absence of common sense irritated but did not surprise them. Laziness was more than intolerable to them; it was inhuman. [...]. Sleep was not for dreaming; it was for gathering strength for the coming day. [...]. You couldn’t learn age, but adulthood was there for all. Mourning was helpful but God was better and they did not want to meet their Maker and have to explain a

wasteful life. They knew He would ask each of them one question: “What have you done?” (Morrison, *Home* 123).

Through the healing touches of these women, who use their own traditional methods, their life experience, to take care of her, Cee finally sees what she has to do, who she has to become. She admits that her lack of education – the same as these competent women – has nothing to do with what happened, and the only one she can blame for her naiveté is herself.

Cee allows herself to grieve for herself, to display gratitude to Frank for the part he played in rescuing her, and then she immediately sets to work, proactively using her skills to assure herself that she will have a future for herself and, probably, her brother.

However, in the face of everything that happened, it all seems too little too late. Cee cannot set aside the ingrained behavior she used to assume with her brother, and so she immediately bends to Frank’s will to use the first quilt she ever sew for something he is not willing to share, “Cee told him no. Absolutely not. Sloppy as the quilt was, she treasured its unimpressive pattern and haphazard palette. Frank insisted. By his perspiration and the steel in his eyes Cee understood that whatever he was up to was very important to him. Reluctantly she slid on her sandals and followed him” (Morrison, *Home* 142). Cee tells herself that this is the last time she does what her brother tells her to do, yet her thoughts ring false face to face with reality. Cee’s lack of closure and future is furthermore highlighted by the fact that the doctor’s experiments have left her unable to bear children, making her physically incapable of generating a new future through motherhood.

Lily is another matter entirely. Compared to Frank and Cee, the motive behind her actions might seem unimportant. She did not witness death as a child, she did not – as far as we know – live in an abusive environment. However, one cannot doubt the fact that seeing herself denied the chance of buying a house – her dream – only because of her race, is the trigger that springs her into action.

Since the moment she is first introduced to us, it is clear that she is an intelligent, driven woman who knows exactly what she has to do to reach her goal and with the determination to back

it. It is no surprise then that even after such a brutal rejection of who she is Lily's first response is to lift her chin and walk out of the office with all the dignity she can possibly muster up, "She raised her chin and left the office as quickly as pride let her" (Morrison, *Home* 74). After that, she immediately sets to work with the clear object in mind that she is going to get the house she wants, determined to allow nobody to take it away from her. However, this single-mindedness she displays, although commendable especially for a woman in her situation and in those years, cleverly hides the fact that she is not dealing with what happened to her at all. Her obsessive focus on the future to the point that she just avoids any mentions of her past means that she never tries to find closure with the humiliation she felt the moment she was denied her dream.

What Lily does is to build on that humiliation, to capitalize on the anger she felt to steady herself in what she has to do if she wants to succeed. The cost of her obsessive determination, however, is the complete obliteration of any potential relationship she may have with someone not as driven as her. While Frank took advantage of the peace and quiet he gleaned from a woman that wanted nothing to do with his past, perhaps a behavior extending from her refusal to deal even only with her own past, Lily could never have stayed with a man whose sole objective in life is to survive and nothing more.

Lily's lack of empathy for Frank's situation becomes glaringly obvious the moment she realizes that Frank feels no push to better his future. The end of their relationship becomes inevitable and predictable, even without having to fall back on some of Frank's earlier considerations on the matter. The scene that closes Lily's chapter signals her abandoning whatever temptation to forge a relationship with any other lover, and her resolution to dedicate herself exclusively to herself and her success.

Although Morrison's latest published novel is undoubtedly centered on facing the consequences of past mistakes and childhood traumas, and is thus obviously focused on the present of the characters involved, there are several considerations to make with regard to the lack of

resolution for the characters present in the novel; characters that, as eloquently put by Jean Wyatt, “must overcome the profound effects of traumatic early loss of love in order to love again” (176).

Bride is the most obvious example of this dramatic interruption in the narration. As we know, Bride’s character is shaped by the complete absence of a loving relationship with her mother throughout her entire childhood. More than once during the novel, we are told that at a certain point – we do not know exactly when – Bride left her home and never saw her mother again. We know that she is not completely removed from Sweetness – she sends her money to pay for the retirement home and to allow her to buy things for herself, if she wants to – but we have no sure way to know what the state of their relationship is. On the one hand, Sweetness claims that Bride sends her money of her own volition, while Bride claims that Sweetness is the one actually begging for money.

Their relationship is understandably complicated; as a child, Bride was taught to see her skin as something unsightly as her mother limited any and all physical contact between the two, afraid of touching a skin so dark and alien to her. Such treatment, as a result, provokes in Bride a compulsion to stop at a physical level when relating to others, making her a “woman trained by all her life experiences to exist at the surface of life” (Wyatt 179). Sweetness made it clear that her skin would only be a disadvantage in life, a source of pain, trouble and sorrow, and she did so to prepare Bride to a world that, in all truth, would never let her forget the color of her skin.

In this desire to protect her daughter by toughing her up, Sweetness is understandable and even, up to a certain point, forgivable. However, to a touch-starved little girl, willing to consider slaps as an acceptable means to convey motherly love, a child who reaches the point of falsely accusing a woman of sexual harassment of children just to get her mother’s approval, Sweetness’ lessons do not appear as the one and only way to protect her, quite the contrary.

There is a tragic sense of irony in witnessing how Sweetness, in trying to toughen up her daughter in preparation of a world that will show her no mercy, is actually the one causing the most damage to Bride, and perhaps Sweetness herself acknowledges this through her repeated denial right at the beginning of the novel, “It’s not my fault. So you can’t blame me. I didn’t do it and have no

idea how it happened” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 3). The length Bride has been pushed to as a child is the source of all the burdens, shackles, which she is always hauling around as she lives her life. At a certain point, we see how Bride is aware of the terrible mistake she made as a child, and, just as childishly, she wishes to set things right with gifts and an apology to the woman she got convicted for fifteen years.

Although her attempt to make things right is poorly planned and painfully insufficient after what happened, Bride shows willingness to set herself free by finding closure with her past. At the same time, she also stands up for herself and follows Booker back to his town in the middle of nowhere not to get back with him, but to get some answers so that she can move on with her life on a “quest for knowledge” (Wyatt 183). For these reasons, the lack of a proper confrontation between Bride and Sweetness cannot but leave Bride’s character arc incomplete, lacking a proper resolution.

Booker’s journey toward closure with his past does not exactly stop; it never truly takes off to begin with – thus making it impossible for him to build a future free of his brother’s ghost. *God Help the Child* focuses primarily on Bride, her focalization is the main one; for this reason – save for an entire chapter dedicated to his past – Booker appears to us through her eyes. His story – although brief and secondary – is extremely important as it is directly linked to Bride’s, not only because of their romantic relationship, but because Booker, much like Bride, hangs onto his past and lets it suffocate him, guide his decisions, free him from the burdens of having to live by himself.

Unlike Bride, who cannot forget her mother’s violence and the woman whose life she ruined because of that, Booker is haunted by his brother’s death as a child, at the hands of a pedophile. Understandably, his whole family is shocked by this death, but while the family heals and slowly moves on, Booker refuses to let his bother truly die. His denial of his brother’s death takes control of his entire life, and it is only made worse by the advice given to him by his aunt Queen, “Don’t let him go, she said. Not until he’s ready. Meantime, hang on to him tooth and claw. Adam will let you know when it’s time” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 117), and that he takes as an encouragement to live his life not for his brother too but as if he were his brother.

It is this staunch refusal to let his past rest that saps him of the will to build a future for himself, and that makes it impossible for him to have a relationship with anyone. Admittedly, Bride's decision to make contact with the woman she had falsely accused of rape is something Booker cannot rationally tolerate given his past. However, his reaction to this piece of Bride's past cannot but highlight how his past is still pretty much his present to the point where he will literally go back to his aunt – his only living tie to the past – to hide from Bride, someone who would force him to face his past.

The problem is that even though Bride does follow him, and does force him to face the fact that he clings to his brother's memory to avoid any connection to other people, we are never really sure that he does actually find closure. The fact is that the way Queen's few words seem capable of convincing him to "renounce a devotion to the dead so deep that he has given his body over to it for more than a decade" (Wyatt 180), seems too easy a 'resolution', if we can even call it that. Queen's death right after Booker and Bride's confrontation could be read as the exorcising of his brother's ghost – Queen was the one that unintentionally encouraged Booker to make his brother's death his life – but the book ends without certainties.

As Booker pours his Aunt's ashes in a river and throws away the trumpet he'd taken to play for his brother, Bride tells him that she is pregnant with his child, a future that belongs to the both of them. This would be enough to make us believe that Bride and Booker have finally found their peace, but the epilogue in which Sweetness claims to have received a letter from Bride where she tells her mother of her pregnancy, reveals that Bride never mentioned the presence of a father to her child, "I reckon the thrill is about the baby, not its father, because she doesn't mention him at all" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 176). Because of this, we are left wondering if Bride purposefully avoided any mention of Booker to keep her mother from tainting her happiness, or whether he has left her again, thus signaling that he was not capable of letting go of the past.

Contrary to Bride and Booker, Sweetness and Brooklyn are two characters whose story reaches an end. There is no development for them, because when we are introduced to them they have

already reached the end of their journey. As almost every character in the novel, Brooklyn's is a past of sexual abuse and lack of a maternal figure capable of protecting her adequately. Her attitude, however, is completely different from Bride's; instead of letting the past crowd her and paralyze her, Brooklyn seems to have found way to put her traumatic experience to rest through sheer willpower and the knowledge that she would go back to being the scared little girl she was if she did not succeed in her intent.

In a way, Brooklyn could be said to represent the kind of person Bride could have become if, instead of letting the past get to her, she had moved on by building walls around herself. Although it may seem like Brooklyn has reached a point where she has come to terms with the sexual abuse she experienced because of her uncle, she is not coping at all.

All through the novel, Bride keeps repeating how Brooklyn is truly an amazing friend, how she is the only person she can truly trust in life. This way of describing Brooklyn, however, clashes with the way she behaves. Brooklyn does show affection toward Bride – she goes immediately to help her after she is attacked by Sofia, she listens to her when she explains what happened and tries to give her advice, though, not knowing the whole story, her words are inappropriate. She is otherwise capable of a level of mean-spiritedness that makes it hard to understand how their friendship even exists.

As soon as Brooklyn realizes that Bride is losing herself, she does not lose time in planning to steal her place at work, all the while pretending to wanting to help her. Brooklyn has not accepted her past, she probably would have been more sympathetic if she had; she has simply distanced herself from it, cutting it out of her life. As a result, Brooklyn is now set in her own ways with no possibility to change anymore, set in seeing her relationship exclusively through sexual lenses.

Sweetness is much the same. We know nothing of her past, but right from the beginning, she is making up excuses for herself and the way she treated her daughter, denying that she is at fault for how her life turned out to be. Her reasoning is not wrong, particularly when she explains how Bride's skin color had the possibility of ruining her life in the society they live in. She does show remorse for

the way she treated her, for the violence she used against her – a special mention to the slap she threw her daughter when she had her first menstrual cycle, making her entrance into womanhood a memory of pain and rejection “When she soiled the bedsheet with her first menstrual blood, Sweetness slapped her and then pushed her into a tub of cold water” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 79). But she remains convinced that what she did, how she raised her, was the right and only way to shield her as much as possible from the ugliness of the world.

For the majority of the novel, her consistent remarking how she only did what she had to sounds like she is trying to delude herself into thinking she did no wrong. It is the epilogue that reveals how she is genuinely convinced that her method of parenting was without fault, even congratulating herself on Bride’s success, something she seems to think has to be ascribed to her.

Sweetness seems aware of the fact that there will never be forgiveness for her from Bride, and she even admits that times have changed and Bride’s skin color could now be used to her advantage, but she never stops believing that what she did was a necessary evil depending on society not on her, looking down on those who would judge her.

The fact that both women are so set in their ways, unwilling to even take into consideration the fact that their convictions might be wrong, makes Brooklyn and Sweetness incapable of ever changing. Change can only come from facing one’s past, with all its mistakes. Because these two women refuse to properly deal with their past, they have no way of building a future for themselves, remaining stuck where they are.

## Chapter 1.3

Probably the most obvious characteristic of late style novels is the presence of death, of the end, of the declining of people or societies, of the crumbling of everything in the face of the passing of time. Inevitably, as authors get closer and closer to the end of their life, they find themselves face to face with their own mortality, with the impossibility of going beyond what is humanly possible.

We all know death is inevitable, and yet, that knowledge alone is not enough to prevent us from struggling with it. In the cases of artists, many times one can notice a quiet acceptance of the end of life, a certain peacefulness that comes over those artists who feel they have done all they possibly could in life. After a long and artistically fulfilling life, some artists decide to retire to private life, content with living the rest of their life away from the hustle and bustle of a public life.

A perfect example, as demonstrated by John Updike in his article on *The New Yorker*, of the artist quietly bowing out without scandals, is Shakespeare who said his farewells in his last play *The Tempest*. *The Tempest* is, of course, not the first of Shakespeare's plays to deal with death, but it is the one that recapitulates his previous plays and leads Shakespeare's artistry to a peaceful end,

Death is acknowledged to be real in a late tragedy like *Anthony and Cleopatra* but is denied in *Pericles*, as it is, though to a lesser extent, in *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Yet the last of these, *The Tempest*, is one of Shakespeare's masterpieces: the strained contrivances and righted wrongs of the previous romances [...] fall into place (Updike, *Late Works*).

Although in *The Tempest* death is denied, thus contradicting my previous assertion of Shakespeare's quiet and peaceful bowing out, the recapitulatory quality of the play, the way it looks back onto previous plays fixing their problems and improving upon them, makes it "a lovingly composed late work, the roughness of its predecessors smoothed, their dissonances resolved." Keeping in mind that Shakespeare had no way of knowing that he was writing his last play, it is still

worth noting that the intention implied in *The Tempest* is that of making peace with his own work and life. There is no sense of incompleteness in the play, no regret, no anger at the passing of time or at ageing.

Of course, awareness of being getting closer to the moment of one's death, does not always mean finding peace with it. In the case of late style, Said himself preferred to focus on those artists who did not accept their ever-nearing death, and thus produced works of art that reflected their anger, their unwillingness to simply bow down to their end as if there was nothing else they could do, "What of artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction? What if age and ill health don't produce the serenity of ripeness is all?" (Said 7), Beethoven is a great example of an artist who clearly did not intend to go down quietly while still capable of producing more and more.

The contrast between the two different ways of dealing with death is much more evident if one compares the last works of these two great artists, Shakespeare and Beethoven. As we have already established, Shakespeare's last work certainly was backward looking, a recapitulatory piece that aimed at fixing all the mistakes or regrets present in the previous plays. Although the disappearance of death from the play is a testament to Shakespeare's desire to avoid focusing on it while being still quite alive and at the peak of his career – though, of course, he had no way of knowing this –, the play generates a sense of tranquility and peacefulness, making it the perfect send-off for the play writer.

Beethoven's last works, however, lead down a completely different path. Much like Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Beethoven's last compositions are characterized by a certain recapitulatory quality. The composer's earlier works can be recognized in his last creations, but unlike Shakespeare, there is no peace to be found in this piece of music. Not only is there no acceptance of the end, no serenity in the last composition, the absurd difficulty of the pieces highlights the uncooperativeness of the music. There is no harmony, no resolution, only the knowledge that there can be no greater symphony, and if it were possible, he would not be the one to create it.

Another great example could be the writer Jean Genet. He dedicated his whole life to the Palestinian struggle against the unjust and unlawful seizing of its land, and as a westerner, he did so with the intent to understand the Arab people and their agency. In his book, Said, who actually had the chance to speak to Genet in person, underlines how Genet's last works are filled with images and themes of death.

In this case, what makes Genet's last works – *Le Captif* in particular – emanate a sense of melancholy, is knowing that Genet was dying as he wrote, and that at that point in his life, he was sure to see many of his friends and companions die for the Palestinian cause. Perhaps that is why *Les Paravents*, and *Le Captif*, both end with a mother and a son both dead or about to die, who get reunited by Genet in his own mind, making their death disappear in favor of their reconciliation.

Death is always present in Toni Morrison's novels, sometimes as a main theme around which the stories of her characters revolve, sometimes as an event that a given character has to come to terms with. Death permeates Toni Morrison's perhaps most famous novel, *Beloved*. The dead child Sethe chose to kill so as not to see her turned into a slave, comes back wreaking havoc in Sethe's life, pushing her to either confront what she has done or let it consume her.

Death in Toni Morrison is never just there, it serves a purpose, be it a spur to force a character to act, to face him or her self, or to underline the tragic beginnings of the African-American community which unfortunately keeps being a part of their present history as well, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (Morrison, *Beloved* 6).

Morrison's latest four novels are no different in this regard. Death concerns every character in these novels. Sometimes it is the reason for their lack of a sense of belonging after their family's death. Other times it is the spirit of a man that just will not let go of the living. While other times still it is the unspeakable sin that ends up ruling the character's life, and finally, as the guilt that will never let go after we unfairly lose a loved one.

The reason why I believe that Toni Morrison's use of death in her novel can be considered as a sign of late style depends on the fact that death in her novels has always a supernatural inflection

that, in the case of the last four novels I am analyzing, can be considered as a denial of death in itself. Many times, Morrison has death take on the form of ghosts that do not, per se, torment the living – the living do not even perceive these ghosts – but weight them down with their unseen presence. I do not believe that Morrison herself is trying, consciously or not, to ‘deny’ death by making it something that can be transcended, something from which anyone can come back, but it certainly looks like that is exactly what her characters seem intent on doing.

Death being intertwined so tightly with life makes it into something belonging to the present instead of something belonging the past. In this chapter, I wish to analyze how death in the last four published novels by Toni Morrison is such a prevalent theme, so closely tied to each character’s story, to the point of almost becoming a character itself.

Death in *Love* takes the form of Bill Cosey’s spirit acting as a guide for young Junior. She first ‘meets’ him while still at Correctional, referring to him as her Good Man. It is important to take into consideration the kind of male role models present in Junior’s life, if one wants to understand why she is so eager to trust and follow Cosey’s spirit instructions and desires without questioning them.

Born in the Settlement, an extremely poor neighborhood where scholarly education simply did not rank among the priorities for children, Junior never meets her father; he left soon after her birth and never came back. Junior, in her heart, keeps longing for him, sure that if she just waited long enough, he would come back from the army – that is where her mother told her he went.

In the meantime, she is surrounded by brothers, cousins and uncles, doggedly set in their ways, uneducated and inordinately proud of being part of the Settlement, to the point of threatening Junior of physical harm if she does not return the cottonmouth she gifted a friend with to its rightful place, “They wanted the cottonmouth returned to its rightful home. Among the threats if she didn’t go get it were ‘to break your pretty little butt’ and ‘hand you over to Vosh’” (Morrison, *Love* 57). Displaying the stubbornness generally associated with the people born in the Settlement, Junior refuses and is immediately hounded by her male family members who chase after her and even try to run her over

with a car – she gets hurt and her foot remains gravely wounded, ending up deformed for the lack of proper care.

The male figures in her childhood are either absent – her father – or dispensers of violence and verbal rebuttals aimed at her desire to stay in school and elevate herself from the horrible condition she is in. Correctional offers her a few years of respite, as she is finally able to continue with her education and even learn useful skills that would come in handy later in her life. Of course, the peace she has found is shattered once the time comes for her to leave Correctional.

Before she is allowed to leave, the Director of the establishment tries to force himself on her and she, without truly intending to, throws him off the terrace where they were standing. If the physical assault had not been enough, she is then ignored – together with the evidence of what was happening in the form of the Director’s unbuckled pants – when she explains what the Director had tried to do to her.

It is at this point that she ‘meets’ her Good Man Cosey, and the vagueness of the encounter makes it hard to understand how Junior could possibly feel safe in the presence of this spirit considering the way Cosey behaved in life, especially toward women. We as readers are aware of all his sins, but with outsiders, he assumed the role of doting father of a black community that “does not criticize Cosey for the sexual exploitation of a child” (Wyatt 109), a kind and generous man to be placed among the great men of the time. This is evident by the way Vida – Cosey’s biggest defenders in life and death – and even L talk about him and defend him from accusations. Even Sandler, the only one capable of looking at Cosey with the dispassionate eye of an acquaintance, sometimes seems unsure on how to judge Cosey, even though he witnessed from a front row seat his faults.

Jean Wyatt offers us a perfect explanation behind the community’s reticence in judging Bill Cosey,

Bill Cosey’s success as a world-class hotelier is necessary to the community’s self-esteem and hope. Cosey has achieved financial success in a world that systematically deprives black men of the patriarchal position, and that provides everyone with race pride. He is a

‘race man’, one whose ‘aggressive demonstration of [his] superiority...establishes race pride’ (Carby, 4). Bound by race pride to the outstanding accomplishments of the ‘great man’, no one in the community speaks out against his sexual appropriation of a child (108).

Junior’s longing for a man, not necessarily a lover, who will make her feel safe and protected, that will stand behind her, is enough to make of Cosey’s spirit the perfect crutch she needs to lean on. Cosey’s spirit never says a word to Junior – she only feels impressions of him – yet her role as a negotiator between him and Heed and Christine is made evident by the way she willingly steps into the disagreement between the two women.

The fact that Cosey never says a word, forces us to rely on Junior’s interpretation of what he wants her to do, thus making his objective in the story unclear; either he pushed Junior so that she would bring the two women to the confrontation that delivered them, or he wanted their demise. Either way, he got his wish in the end.

Junior is not the only one aware of Cosey’s presence in the house even after his death. Heed and Christine might not be able to see Cosey the way Junior ‘sees’ him, but they do find it impossible to erase his presence from their life even after all those years. It is a testament to Morrison’s writing talent that Cosey’s presence is easily detected in every chapter even though he is not physically present in it. We know right from the start that Bill Cosey died decades before the beginning of the story, yet already the title of each chapter tells us that he will be one of the main protagonists – Portrait, Friend, Stranger, Benefactor, Lover, Husband, Guardian, Father, Phantom. Both Heed and Christine continuously bring up to mind specific moments of their lives where Cosey was one of the main stars, for good or for bad, these memories invading their daily lives and disrupting them.

Heed gets swept away by memories of her husband – memories that leave her momentarily trapped in her past, and rekindle her will to find a way to make the hotel hers and hers alone. Heed is only a child when Cosey marries her, and for a while – save that initial moment of horrible wrongness when he touched her not yet developed breast – she accepts the change in her life with the innocence

only a child possesses. In a parody of what would be a classic Cinderella story – Heed is elevated from utter poverty by Cosey who chooses her among all the other women – Heed seems proud of being Cosey’s wife, even seeing her relations with other women “as a competition for the one place that hinges on the prince’s choice” (Wyatt 114).

By the end of the novel, we see that she is well aware of how wrong and horrible what Cosey did to her was, “He took all my childhood away from me, girl” (Morrison, *Love* 194). Nonetheless, every time she loses herself in her memories of him, there is a certain fondness in the way she thinks of him. It is important to underline, however, how most of the time she thinks of him, Cosey seems more like a father figure than a lover which would explain Heed’s way of addressing him as ‘Papa’, and not as ‘my husband’.

In a much similar way, Cosey is always present in Christine’s life. Like Heed, Christine too is often reminded of her grandfather and the tension that reigned in the house ever since he chose to marry her best friend. What truly hurt Christine was not the fact that Cosey was marrying a child, but the fact that he was taking away what was already hers, Heed, “He took all of you away from me” (Morrison, *Love* 194). The moment she realizes what is happening, and how happy Heed seems to be as she waves her happiness in Christine’s face, it is already too late, the wound has been inflicted. Because of this, for the following decades, “Rather than pitying both herself and Heed as victims of Cosey’s predations, Christine’s rage targets Heed” (Wyatt, 113).

The hate Christine develops for Heed, whom she starts to see as a usurper of her family and home, does nothing but grow more and more as she sees how Cosey favors her over his own granddaughter, until the moment he sends her away, definitively leaving her homeless. For the rest of her life Christine is marked by this rejection and her life is irrevocably shaped by her craving for a man who will not abandon her. However, Christine keeps tying herself to men who abandon her, cheat on her, and discard her like a cheap tool, always reminding her of the loss first of Heed and then of Cosey (her home).

What all this shows us is that, even though he is not physically present, Cosey is always present in Heed and Christine. What he has done to them, the damage he has caused, shapes these two incredibly similar women, in a way controlling their decisions even after he is long dead. As long as they remain clinging to the past, Cosey will never set them free, which is why his spirit vanishes when Heed and Christine finally lay everything in the open. Were he not present in spirit form, Cosey's presence – his not-death – would be no less evident just by paying attention to these two women.

L is a much harder character to analyze. We are introduced to her right at the beginning of the novel, as she is the one who lets us know where we are in the complicated story of Cosey's Hotel and its inhabitants. Immediately we feel her detachment from what is happening, it is obvious that she loved Cosey's Hotel and working there as a cook, but the distance she seems to have put between herself and that place appears to be greater than the simple distance one puts when changing one's job.

As I said in previous chapters, she mainly establishes herself as a grounding force, a keeper of past memories that should not be lost or forgotten. Throughout the novel, L keeps adding bits and pieces to the story as the characters reveal their versions of what happened, almost wanting to offer us an impartial account of what really happened, "glimpses of a different love story" (Wyatt 104) – that of Heed and Christine.

Because L was a witness of what happened, always remaining at a distance, and because of the fact that, since the start of the novel, she has taken on the role of narrator, we are inclined to believe her account of the story as the more accurate and impartial. Not once do we have reason to believe that she is anything more than an ex-employee still keeping an eye on the Cosey girls – at a certain point she even mentions meeting Junior, "The girl with no underwear – she calls herself Junior – comes in a lot. The first time I saw her she looked to me like somebody in a motorcycle gang" (Morrison, *Love* 66).

However, while Heed and Christine are finally telling each other everything, Heed mentions that L has died. We are not given a precise moment for her death, so we do not know if she died in the middle of the story or not, but the discovery that she is dead, and possibly has been right from the beginning, pushes us to reevaluate what she has said and also raises questions about her identity. Before the revelation of her death, we do not think much of her avoiding to give us her full name; she is simply telling us the story of the Cosey girls as a witness, she is not the protagonist of the novel so it does not matter too much whether we know her name or not.

In the end, knowing what we know, we cannot help but ask ourselves who L truly is; is she simply a cook or does L stand for the Love that gives its title to the book? Is she both? At this point we can no longer be sure of L, and, unlike what Jean Wyatt claims in calling L “the voice of truth and authority in the novel’s concluding pages” (Wyatt 104), the monumental omission of her death makes it impossible for us to be sure if what she has told us is the impartial truth or not, nor can we trust her final assessment of Heed and Christine – did they really find peace?

What is certain is that L can be interpreted as a presence intended to balance out Cosey’s spirit’s passion inciting a willingness to act, that makes everything spiral out of control as soon as Junior arrives, the young woman acting as a valve to let Cosey vent his desires. Seen this way, L is the one who brings order to the chaos Cosey wrecked and continued to wreck in Heed and Christine’s life; she provides us with the whole story, although maybe not a completely true one, and puts everything that happened into perspective. In a way, “L’s vision is unblinkered by imprisonment in the present moment. Released from time, she, like Yeats’s artist of eternity, can see with equal clarity ‘what is past, and passing, and to come’” (Wyatt 119).

Whether or not we can believe her account of the story, we can believe her intention to finally lay this story to rest once and for all, as she does when she confesses to being the one who killed Cosey, and later when she meets Celestial by Cosey’s tombstone, probably saying her goodbyes to the story that can finally remain in the past, and parting from this world once and for all.

Death cannot but be a main theme in *A Mercy*. A story revolving around the beginning of slavery cannot but touch, in the most banal way, upon the mortality rate that concerned slaves as much as masters and mistresses. Of course, even though the New World was seen as a symbol of hope, of new beginnings and opportunities, the conditions the settlers and the slaves had to face were brutal to say the least, and death obviously abounded.

But beyond this, death has a main role to play in the story of all the characters. It is important to notice that all the characters in the novel, all for different reasons, are orphans. Rebekka is sent away by her family and she has no idea whether her parents are even alive; Jacob's parents are both dead. Lina's whole village has been decimated by a pestilence. Sorrow's family died in a shipwreck. Florens has been abandoned by her mother.

Because of this, all the characters have already been touched by death, and have been marked by it. In this sense, I would like to focus on the Vaarks and their particular dealings with death. Jacob, as shown to us at the beginning of the novel, is a straightforward man, with solid principles (he refuses to trade in the flesh) and determination to be successful in the trade he has chosen. One of the first things we witness him do is saving a dying raccoon, soiling his clothes right before a meeting with a planter for important business, and freeing him into the wild well aware of his impending death, "Once he succeeded, the raccoon limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 11). The futility of this first action of his, in my opinion, sums up his character and makes his own death inevitable.

Jacob is a study in contradictions from beginning to end. As I said, he refuses to trade in the flesh finding the slave trade as a whole positively disgusting, yet he already has two slaves back in his farm (Lina and Sorrow, although they can enjoy more freedom than any slave could have hoped for, are still slaves), and he accepts ownership of a third, Florens. While accepting Florens is something he does against his will, he is quick to see the merits of having a little girl around; in a display of male simplicity and tactlessness, he hopes that Florens' presence will distract his wife from the death of their last living child.

It is in this context that we first touch upon the tragedy at the core of the Vaark family. Both Jacob and Rebekka hoped that the New World would provide them with the chance to build a new life for themselves, but both of them get consistently punished by life. Rebekka wished for a family, for children that would give her the love and affection her own family withheld from her, “Her parents treated each other and their children with glazed indifference and saved their fire for religious matters” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 74). Yet all her children die within years of their birth and her husband grows steadily apart as he focuses on his trades neglecting both his wife and his farm.

Jacob wished to become a successful trader, enough to build a legacy he could pass down to his son; instead, he only builds a useless, empty mansion, remarkable only because of its elaborate fence built by the blacksmith. After Jacob’s death, his farm dies with him as all the women who populate it lose their sense of community and they each go back to looking after themselves.

It is Jacob’s unchecked ambition that dooms him, and by extension his entire family, to the death of his body and mind, as in the case of Rebekka. To his ambition, Jacob sacrifices even his principles without having to think twice about it. The mere mention of the money he could make exploiting the slaves in the Barbados, convinces him to try doing it himself, using the excuse that there is a difference between owning slaves and profiting from the labor of people he does not know nor ever will.

Coincidentally, Barbados is also the place where Florens’ mother was taken to at first, and then purchased by Señor who told his men to break her in, “But first the mating, the taking of me and Bees and one other to the curing shed. Afterwards, the men who were told to break we in apologized. Later an overseer gave each of us an orange. And it would have been all right. It would have been good both times, because the results were you and your brother” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 165-166). It cannot be a coincidence that the place Florens’ mother comes from is also the place Jacob voluntarily chooses to exploit, resulting in him being cursed to death because of his boundless and vain ambition.

If the death surrounding the Vaarks takes on the form of an inescapable destiny that engulfs them, death in Sorrow and Lina’s cases represents the cruel future that awaits their people. Sorrow is

the only survivor in a shipwreck that kills her father and every member of the crew, her family so to speak. It is that death and aching loneliness that compels her to create almost an alternative identity embodied in Twin's voice. In the life of displacement that awaits her, Twin is not only a comforting presence; she is also a precious companion to fill the void left in her where her family, her community, should have been.

First when she lives with the couple who found her, then when she lives in Jacob's farm, Sorrow remains alone, somehow separated from the rest of the people in her same situation and that should welcome her among them. Lina believes there is something wrong, wicked, within her, something that leads to Patricia's death – the last of Rebekka's children and also the one who lived the longest. Rebekka does not listen to what she considers Lina's superstitions, but even so, Sorrow will lose her own baby when she commits the mistake of letting Lina assist her during the birth. The moment in which Lina kills Sorrow's baby – a baby Sorrow saw yawning – will remain with her forever and solidify her need to complete herself through the creation of her own family, her own community.

When she gives birth to Complete, a daughter probably fathered by Jacob Vaark, Sorrow finally manages to fill the void which had previously been filled by Twin. Why then do I say that death in this case is a representation of her future? Sorrow's fierce attachment to her daughter, the one who completes her, springs from the loss of her family in tender age. At the end of the novel, Sorrow willingly distances herself from the other occupants of the farm, the one stable place in her life, and in doing so ignores what will inevitably happen as soon as Rebekka realizes that she cannot run the place on her own: the selling of the slaves.

Sorrow, in her absolute love and attachment to her daughter, is essentially taking the place of Florens' mother in the long history of mothers and daughters being torn apart by the system of slavery here still in development.

Lina's future is much more evident considering her being a Native-American woman. As the only survivor – with a couple of children she will never see again – of her village, Lina can only rely

on herself to survive among the settlers who take her in. She is taken in by Presbyterians who give her a new name – we are never told what her true name is, the one speaking of her identity – and try to ‘elevate’ her from her status of a savage to a useful member of society, “They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 47). It is while in their care that Lina starts picking up bits and pieces of European culture, mixing it to the culture and traditions of her people – traditions that she barely remembers herself and that she will not be able to pass on to someone else, thus making them disappear with her death when her time will come, “Relying on memories and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of thing” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 48).

The piety of this Christian family does not last long and Lina is soon traded for spices to Jacob Vaark, not before cursing the man who abused her before leaving. Even though at the farm she is the most valuable worker in Jacob’s possession and she even manages to strike a friendship with Rebekka and Jacob, she still remains an outsider. Rebekka dismisses her concerns over Sorrow as the superstitions of a savage, and after her illness, she reaches the point of flat out rejecting Lina’s culture enforcing hers instead.

Rebekka’s illness is what consolidates Lina’s status as an outsider. When Rebekka gets better, she is a completely different person, much more like the Presbyterians who had first ‘taken care’ of her, “Florens’ journey to the blacksmith takes away the one girl Lina considered like a daughter and to whom she was teaching the ways of her people, thus cementing the death of her culture as Florens returns a changed and hardened woman.

It is for these reasons that I believe death in Lina’s narrative is a clear reference to the gradual disappearance of Native-American culture and ways of life brought about by the settlers. It is not simply the physical death of her village, but the cultural death of her ways that leaves Lina with no purpose and no way to communicate with Rebekka and Florens, the two no longer tolerating or willing to listen to her.

Death in *Home* takes on a much more tangible form. Throughout the length of the novel, we witness how Frank is tormented by the death of his childhood friends during their time together in Korea, and how his mental disability keeps proposing again and again their final moments in debilitating ways.

As I said in previous chapters, Frank's PTSD literally keeps him from moving on from the past, but it also allows death to literally invade his life, physically interrupting it with extremely vivid flashbacks, that either leave him numb, violent, or on the brink of a panic attack. In Frank's case, death is not a spirit with dubious intentions, nor is it an inescapable doom hanging over an entire people; it is his memories turned tangible in a torment that he could potentially learn to cope with, but not defeat for good.

His being an African-American soldier of course worsens Frank's vain battle against the demons of his past. Assistance to veterans was not that common at the time, even less so if you were not white. The complete lack of assistance leaves Frank with no way to learn how to cope with his disability. His situation is only made worse by his refusal to admit to himself, and to other who care about him (his sister), what he has done in Korea; "Frank's trip home is a barbed odyssey, his Penelope a country that was happy to have his black life and black body in service of a proxy war, but is quick to reject both on his return" (Freeman, *TheAustralian.com.au*).

When Frank finally confesses to the writer – or "the representation of the writer who is in the process of writing his story" (Wyatt 145) – that he was the one who killed the little Korean girl because she managed to arouse him, something he could not bear, he takes the first step into coping with his problems.

In her book, Jean Wyatt claims that the reason that pushes Frank to shoot the Korean girl who touched his crotch and offered him oral sex in exchange for food, is Frank's secret sexual fantasy involving his little sister Cee, mostly due to the similarities between the two girls in question,

The similarity of the girl's hand to Cee's hand is comforting through its familiarity. However, this familiarity becomes horrific when the little Korean girl smiles and at the same time Frank feels that same hand on his penis, as the girl offers oral sex [...]. The smile vividly recalls Cee's because it reveals the girl's missing front teeth and thus reproduces Cee's smile when she had lost her baby teeth – the same teeth that are preserved among Frank's boyhood treasure (Wyatt 149).

In my opinion, however, the reason behind the horror Frank feels because of what he has done is much simpler without the need to refer to secret fantasies of which there is no hint throughout the novel. When Frank witnesses the death of his childhood friends, he felt death stretch his fingers into the peaceful life he had waiting for him back home. The routine and the excitement of war, however, helped him in containing its influence. However, when he met the Korean girl, for a moment she reminded him of his sister Cee, the one person he loves more than anyone else in the world. Because of this momentary superimposition, the act of killing the Korean girl, spilled death uncontrollably into Frank's peaceful heaven, the childhood where he was able to protect those around him, where he was innocent.

In Cee's case, death assumes a much more symbolic meaning. Since the first scene of the novel, Cee is shown as completely dependent on her brother's protection. The absence from home of both parents – they both work all day long to earn enough money for the four of them – inevitably means that she has to find a new parental figure to look after her. Frank fills that role seamlessly all his life, protecting her not only from the physical blows dealt by Lenore – though he could do nothing for the verbal ones – but from anyone who meant to hurt her.

Because of this constant protection, Cee remains a child ignorant of the ways of the world and completely unable to deal with life's challenges. Her naiveté when dealing with what life throws her way, leads her to make irreparable mistakes that, in the long term, she will have to pay dearly. Her inexperience combines with her desire to prove herself to Lenore who has spent all her life demeaning her for something that was not even in her power to control.

To Lenore, the fact that she was born in the streets, marks her as someone lower than a prostitute – at least prostitutes have the ‘decency’ to go give birth in a hospital, with a roof over their heads. Of course, Lenore does not care minimally for the fact that Cee and her family have been chased away from their home by a white mob.

Once Frank leaves for the army, Cee immediately lets herself be swept away by the first boy who pays her attention, only to end up revealing himself to be an impostor who runs away on the first chance he gets, leaving Cee alone and, for the first time, responsible for herself in a world she cannot possibly comprehend,

His name was Principal but he called himself Prince. [...]. All the girls were impressed with his big-city accent and what they believed was his knowledge and wide experience. Cee most of all. [...]. There was no job in or around Lotus that Prince allowed himself to take so he took her to Atlanta. Cee looked forward to a shiny life in the city where [...] she learned that Principal had married her for an automobile (Morrison, *Home* 48-49).

Knowing that going back to her hometown would only serve the purpose of proving that Lenore was right all along about her, she decides to remain in Atlanta in a state of poverty and ends up accepting a job she knows nothing about from a white doctor.

This job brings about Cee’s ‘death’ and her subsequent ‘rebirth’ into a new woman. Because of her ignorance of the world, she lets the doctor experiment on her body believing it to be all in function of helping the poor people coming and going from the doctor’s mansion. The horrible experiments the doctor subjects her body to, leave Cee on the brink of death and only Frank’s providential intervention prevents her from actually dying.

Frank brings her back home, the same home both of them despise for different reasons, where Cee can be healed – and in a sense reborn – thanks to the healings arts of the women of the town who, with their mutual help and support, underline how “as it was during slavery, the network of women is still needed for stability and survival” (Wyatt 167). The chapter dedicated to the women curing not

only Cee's body but her mind as well, is probably the one which summarizes the meaning of the book; going back home and always finding a community ready to help you whether they like you or not. The townswomen help Lenore after her stroke even though she despised them, and they berate Cee for her stupidity in dealing with the white doctor while curing her with all the knowledge they have,

I knew you before you could walk. You had those big, pretty eyes. They was full of sadness, though. I see how you tagged along with your brother. When he left you ran off with that waste of the Lord's air and time. Now you back home. Mended finally, but you might just run off again. Don't tell me you going to let Lenore decide again who you are? If you thinking about it, let me tell you something first. Remember the story about the goose and the golden eggs? How the farmer took the eggs and how greed made him stupid enough to kill the goose? I always thought a dead goose could make at least one good meal. But gold? Shoot. There was always the only thing on Lenore's mind. She had it, loved it, thought it put her above everybody else. Just like the farmer. Why didn't he plow his land, seed it, and grow something to eat? [...] Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and you woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore decide who you are. That's slavery (Morrison, *Home* 125-126).

They take on themselves what should have been Cee's mother responsibility of teaching her about life, about how to take care of herself because no one else ever will. Cee learns everything she possibly can from these women, discarding her idea that a lack of formal education could somehow put her at a lower level than the rest of the world. With the help of these women, Cee is reborn a new woman, one capable of accepting what her life has become because of her own mistakes, but also capable, hopefully, of learning from them, making this the only positive 'death' in Morrison's last four published novels.

Although there are other deaths in *God Help the Child*, the death of Booker's brother, Adam, is certainly the most important one as it has consequences that shape Booker's life and impact, indirectly, even Bride's life. There is only one chapter dedicated fully to Booker – a chapter defined

by Muyumba as the “novel’s most accomplished section” because of the way the author is capable of addressing “the vagaries of black masculinity as sensitively, insightfully, and elegantly as Toni Morrison” (Muyumba, *TheAtlantic.com*) – where for the one and only time, the author lets us peek into his head and understand his reasoning for behaving the way he does. That chapter, in my opinion, is more than enough to understand Booker.

Adam’s death occurs when both he and Booker are still children. As we get introduced to Booker’s family life before the tragic death, we witness a serene atmosphere inside the house, where both parents and children live their perfectly happy, simple and unremarkable lives. They are not a particularly wealthy family, but the parents make it clear that education is not something to be trifled with and that has to be taken seriously. They encourage their children to “to think for themselves and question received knowledge, while also validating their innermost feelings and anxieties” (Wyatt 173).

During their Saturday breakfast, through informal family reunions, the parents encourage each of their children to open up about the problems they may have, their interests, and they push them to express their opinions, enforcing the notion that communication is the base of understanding each other and the only way to solve one’s problems. What destroys this serene environment, understandably so, is Adam’s disappearance and subsequent death. After that, there are no longer family reunions and Booker closes himself off, not only from his family but also from himself.

The difference in the way we perceive Booker before the trauma of Adam’s death is absolutely jarring. Before it, he is a bright, open, and friendly kid; after, he puts a certain distance between himself and the rest of the world. He starts playing the trumpet as a way to feel closer to his brother, he keeps studying but he is clearly flailing, unable to find a purpose in life or even understand why he keeps studying and going on with his life. He seems incapable of forging significant friendships with others, the only relationship we see him having is born out of a mutually satisfactory companionship rather than love, his view of the world turns extremely bleak and hopeless.

All the while, inside him, there is this new rage directed toward all those who use violence against children, and that violence is not only sexual violence – Adam was killed by a pedophile – but also neglect of one’s child or willful endangerment of one. This rage inside of himself is what, always, drives him to act and do something when he sees a child in danger, even if acting means facing time in jail and fights. This rage is the reason his one relationship ends when his girlfriend does not understand why he had to intervene when he saw a child in danger, “‘There was a little kid in that car. A baby!’ He said. ‘It wasn’t your kid and it wasn’t your business, shouted Felicity’” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 129).

The reason his relationship with Bride seemed to work for a while, was only because she never asked him to share anything about his life. Booker is more than willing to listen to Bride share her experiences of the past, and he even comforts her when needed. However, he cannot share something of himself because, in a sense, his whole personality has been annulled by his need to keep his brother alive inside of himself, “his preoccupation with Adam’s death gets in the way of other attachments” (Wyatt 173).

When Booker encourages his family to set up a scholarship in honor of Adam, they reject his proposal because they need to move on with their life instead of remaining stuck on the moment of Adam’s death. What to them is the healthiest way of coping with the loss of Adam is perceived by Booker as an attempt to forget about him and erase him from their lives. His Aunt Queen is the only one who seems to understand his need to hold on to his brother for some time, but he interprets her words to mean that he has to hang on to his brother indefinitely, instead of working on letting him go when he is ready. Because of this, Booker “lives his life with a warped but understandable impression that he has taken his brother’s place” (Freeman, *TheAustralian.com.au*).

After that, he finishes distancing himself from his family and stops talking about his problems, instead writing them down as songs no one will ever read. Only when Florens tracks him down and forces him to have a conversation with them about what happened between them – Booker left her

with no explanation, only telling “You not the woman” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 12) – does he starts to see that maybe his way of dealing with death is tantamount to not dealing with it at all.

In fact, he needs one more push from his aunt to start the process of mending things between him and Bride. However, as I said in previous chapters, even if the premise of Toni Morrison’s novel seems to be that “one must let go of past trauma in order to devote all one’s resources to loving in the present” (Wyatt 173), we do not actually know whether he truly lets go of his brother or not. Death is shown in all its destructive force in *God Help the Child*, as Booker practically annuls himself because of it. That is not something one recovers easily from, no matter the circumstances of his life.

## Chapter 1.4

As I mentioned in previous chapters, an artist toward the end of his career and his life, becomes more and more the sum of all he has done. This is evident in the way he writes in a familiar and already tested way, developed over the course of the years as the writer's peculiar form and style consolidated themselves. After years of writing in a certain way, the writer cannot avoid to be associated with a certain style, a certain way of developing his stories. Of course, the realization that a writer is somehow expected to write a specific book in a specific way, can be perceived by some as a positive thing; a sign that someone has become the staple of a particular genre or writing style, an example for future or contemporaries authors.

In the case of late writers, however, being somehow reduced to being thought of as an author capable or willing to write only in a certain way, causes a surge of anger and a desire to defy the expectations everyone seems to have about him.

John Updike in his already cited article appeared on *The New Yorker* gives us the example of Hawthorne's immense dislike at being diminished as an author only capable of writing familiar books. In his last years, he tried multiple times to experiment with new ways to write his next book, modifying what he had written multiple times as he could not find a way to write that would please him, "I shall never finish it. . . . I cannot finish it unless a great change comes over me; and if I make too great an effort to do so, it will be my death; not that I should care much for that, if I could fight the battle through and win it, thus ending a life of much smoulder and scanty fire in a blaze of glory" (Updike, *NewYorker.com*). In the end, Hawthorne could not even finish his last book and his wife and friends found him to be in a restless state that he did not seem able to shake off, "It seems to me that more and more delicate melodies are struck out from his mind at every revolution of the earth-ball, so that it gets to be a swan-song almost" (Updike, *NewYorker.com*).

Hawthorne is not, of course, the only author who felt the need to experiment with his writing style toward the end of his life. Melville tried going back to simplicity, to strip his writing style of anything and everything unnecessary to story telling. But even so, he did not really create anything new, as much as he simply went back to something already tried and tested.

Innovation, while being close to the end of one's life is not something that I consider to be achievable, especially in the context of changing and remodeling one's writing style after having built it and strengthened it for years and years. As Said reported in his book on late style, "For Adorno, lateness [...] includes the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness" (Said 13).

This need the late writers feel to go beyond what they have done, to gather all their work, synthesize it and make something else, something more, is nothing but a fantasy that cannot be fulfilled. "Lateness retains in it the late phase of a human life" (Said 13), and because of this, its very nature keeps the writer from being capable of looking beyond lateness.

When the writer realizes this impossibility, that is when the anger at one's uselessness at one's impotence, blends into the writer's work making it difficult for the public to understand – not being able to comprehend the writer's state of mind –, sometimes even producing a sense incompleteness. "Late works remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis: they do not fit any scheme, and they cannot be reconciled or resolved, since their irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic or something else" (Said 12).

This tension between wanting to change, to go beyond what seems to us to be a limit we cannot hope to overcome, and the realization that we cannot in fact transcend life and its course, is not just a matter of form or style, it is also a matter of themes.

Late style, as I have already said, is complicated and uncooperative in itself, and that uncooperativeness is something one can detect in the characters of a novel, in the way they behave and confront the situation they find themselves in.

Jean Genet is an example of uncooperativeness in a character that leaves the audience baffled, disoriented by the sudden shift in the behavior of the character and the subversion of the tropes right when we readers think we have it all figured out, “His later works – most notably *Les Paravents* and *Le Captive Amoureux* – are quite explicit, indeed scandalous, in this regards (in its provisional nature). Much more important than commitment to a cause, much more beautiful and true, he says, is betraying” (Said 79).

Genet is not the only example, although he is maybe the more blatant one. Lampedusa’s novel *The Leopard*, encapsulates as a whole, the tension between the decaying of the time one is living in, the subconscious, inexpressible, and vain desire to preserve it, maybe even prolong its life into the future thanks to one’s work, and the melancholic realization that one cannot do anything to stave off the inevitable.

Throughout the novel, and the movie based on it, there is a sense of wanting to preserve a society considered invaluable and that is being trampled over by the insurgence of a new and somewhat crass generation. Melancholy abounds in this novel set, not without a purpose, during the Unification of Italy thanks to Garibaldi. The old aristocracy that serves as the protagonist of this novel, is one that Lampedusa himself belonged to, giving a sense of reality to the tragedy that is being a part of a luxurious, exclusive, elitist order that no longer has a reason to exist.

All of this presents to us a Lampedusa that feels distant, practically exiled not because of anything he has purposefully done, but because of his own lateness, in a world he cannot possibly find himself belonging to. Lampedusa’s aristocracy is doomed to disappear, no matter how much he wishes he could prevent such disappearance. It is this subtle and vain desire to somehow resist against a change that cannot be stopped, that arouses a feeling of hopelessness, uselessness and anger both in an author who cannot possibly believe he can stall time simply by writing a novel, and in the readers who find themselves invested through melancholy in a world they can never hope to experience because it is already at its end, and because of its selective nature, “It is this that the novel as a whole communicates: a world of great, even luxurious, but now inaccessible privilege connected with, or

more accurately giving rise to, that particular melancholy associated with senescence, loss, and death” (Said 97).

In the latest four novels Toni Morrison published in the new millennium, there is no experimentation, quite the contrary. If one takes the time to compare these last four novels to previous ones published even decades before these – *Beloved* of course comes to mind – there is a reprisal of what is Toni Morrison’s peculiar style: multiple characters who offer multiple points of view, describing the central event of the story in its totality; clues as to what really happened in the story, recognizable as such only after having reached the end of the novel; temporal jumps; memories intruding in the narration and disrupting linearity with the intent to destabilize us readers; layers upon layers of meanings comprehensible only after multiple readings; complex and real characters, who tell complex and real stories.

All of this has been consolidated in these last four novels, reaching a level of fluidity that falters, in my opinion, only in *God Help the Child* where the pause in the narration of present events to give us the point of view of characters other than the protagonist has a disruptive rather than clarifying outcome. However, even if on a formal plane Morrison has reach a stability born out of her many years of writing, this stability does not preclude the presence of a sense of irreconcilability, of uncooperativeness in the themes of her novels.

All the characters in these novels are born out of childhood tragedies that shape the rest of their lives, and their way of confronting these tragedies and the world around them, is destructive for them and the people in their lives. These characters are locked in a continuous struggle between the present they lie in and the future they believe they can build through sheer disillusion – all while being weighted down by pasts that are not erasable.

This struggle is interspersed by melancholy for a past that cannot return, which finds its outlet through conflicts not only within the characters themselves, but with all the other characters as well. The conflicting emotions of wanting to better oneself, find peace in the world they live in, and the reality they have to live with – one that perhaps they simply cannot change –, gives these novels a

peculiar mixture of melancholy perceivable within most of these characters, and rage because of the uselessness in dreaming about what was and cannot ever be again paired with the belief that the future can ever be any better than the past.

Some of these characters are more open than others in their way of clashing with the world surrounding them – Christine and Brooklyne are among them – while others fight more private battles within themselves – Heed, Lina and Cee are perfect examples – but all of them share an ending to their journey – not to be confused with the lack of closure with their past I mentioned in the first chapter – that is not truly such.

I have mentioned before how Toni Morrison has chosen the open ending for all her newer novels, and the result of this choice, in the context of characters striving to change their lives, is a lack of reconciliation of the divisive currents pulling each character in troubling directions, only reinforcing the subtle rage simmering just below the surface of these realistic characters.

Heed in *Love* has the only aim of securing her place as a member of Cosey's family by establishing that she truly is the Cosey girl Bill refers to in his poorly and vaguely drafted will on the back of a menu. It is established that Heed comes from a poor family situation – her father sold her to Bill Cosey, her mother is either absent or simply disinterested in her daughter's life, her family members only care about asking her for money – that left her feeling as though she does not truly have a place in life.

To this, one must add the bitter war waged against her by May, a woman who takes pleasure in seeing her humiliated in front of the family she wishes she could be a part of – memorable is the scene during which Bill Cosey takes her on his knees and spans her like a child at the dinner table, “What she most remembered was her grandfather spanking Heed” (Morrison, *Love* 134) – and that cannot wait for the day she will find a way to get rid of her and throw her in the streets.

Heed's complicated relationship with Christine, her true love in this story, cannot but aggravate an already stressful, painful situation that will not be eased to the very end. Heed is an extremely complicated character: one only has to take into consideration her twisted relationship with

Cosey – at times seen as a lover, others as the father figure she never had – to notice that she is not the silly, ignorant woman Junior, and the rest of the town, believes her to be.

From Christine's memories, L's stories, and the way May never lowered her guard around her for as long as she lived, we can infer that there is a keen mind that Heed has grown especially skilled at hiding from others, even the most perceptive people – Junior and Christine. Her mental strength is not the only part of her that she is capable of hiding from others.

When Junior first meets Heed, her impression of the other woman is that she is nothing more than a frail old woman with deformed hands, incapable of doing much by herself. This frailty is true for the Heed in the present narration, yet when Christine recounts the many arguments they have had through the years, it is not surprising to read that, even though Heed has always been the smaller and more fragile of the two, she never lost to Christine when verbal insults became physical blows.

There is in Heed a steady anger simmering just below the surface, stemming from the many humiliations and hardships she has had to face in her life, unflinching in its constancy and obliterating in its strength. This seething anger is of course directed at those who would presume her to be just a silly little girl, easy to deceive and judge with no shame, but it is also directed at the life she has had and that she is sure she can change by making her place clear and indisputable in Cosey's family.

Yet, does Heed succeed in her intent? Does all her anger and will to fight actually gain her something? Judging by the book's ending, Heed does not accomplish anything of what she had set to do, making it feel as though the relentless determination that kept her going through all the struggles against May and Christine, was completely useless in the end.

Heed's final conversation with Christine does solve many points of contention between the two women, but is it enough to put an end to the hostilities between them, to make all the pain Heed has suffered because of all those who misjudged her, worth it in the end? Even though these two women seem to reach a peaceful end to their long fight, Heed still dies without securing her place as a Cosey for all to see. Christine is the only one who will give her the place she craves in her heart, but to the rest of the world she will remain the little girl held responsible for Cosey marrying her.

In the end, Heed was incapable of changing her life, thus making her fight against a life she never wanted completely useless.

Junior and Christine on the other hand, have no proper conclusion to their stories – this instance must not be confused with their lack of closure with their past I mentioned in a previous chapter. Junior decides to take the job offer Heed published on the newspaper because she considers it as the perfect opportunity to find herself a place that would belong only to her, thanks to the ‘encounter’ with her Good Man. The life she has led up to that point turns her into a disillusioned person. She only thinks about herself because that is the only way to survive in the world, as she had to learn from a very young age.

Junior knows that when you are the odd-one out, you can only rely on yourself and everyone else becomes someone who could hurt you or be a threat. Cosey’s spirit is the only ‘person’ she trusts simply because he cannot hurt her – or so she believes until the moment he disappears, abandoning her to herself. It is for this reason that she has no qualms using or deceiving people. She hides it well behind smiles and witty retorts, but there is an anger within her toward the way the world has treated her that fuels her desire to take the apparent security Heed has within her hotel, and make it her own so she can prove that the people of the Settlement were wrong about her, and change a future that would have seen her just as poor and ignorant as her family was.

In this context, her love affair with Romen is a way for her to please Cosey’s spirit as he watches everything she does, “His spirit infuses Junior with sexual desire, [...], incite Junior to the ever more daring and outrageous feats of sexual bravura with Romen” (Wyatt 115). However, it is also her taking possession of someone simply because she can and because the opportunity presents itself – much in the same way she wants to take the house she was supposed to live in only temporarily.

Throughout the novel she is steady in her plan to subtly turn Heed and Christine even more against each other when they least expect it, but things start to spiral out of control when Cosey abandons her and she starts thinking that her affair with Romen might be something more than just

sexual gratification. It is not, as Romen only loves her body and the way he feels superior to his schoolmates now that he has bedded an older woman, “When he approached the lockers that first day, they knew. And those who didn’t he told – in a way. [...]. The boys hazarded a few lame teases, but Romen’s smile, slow and informed, kept them off balance” (Morrison, *Love* 114).

Suddenly, Junior falters in her self-appointed mission, all because of Romen kissing her ruined foot, “Feeling strong and melted at the same time, Romen reached under the water and raised Junior’s misshapen foot above it. She flinched, tried to yank it out of his hands, but he held on and held on, looking closely at the mangled toes. Then, bending his head, he lifted them to his tongue” (Morrison, *Love* 179), a physical reminder of her being a Settlement girl (I would like to draw attention to the way this moment of intimate acceptance recalls an extremely similar scene in what is perhaps Morrison’s most renowned novel, *Beloved*, “She straightened up and knew, but could not feel, that his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree. [...]. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches” (Morrison, *Beloved* 20). Because of this intimate moment, Junior confesses what she has done to Romen and thus ruins any chance she might have had of succeeding in her endeavor of changing her life.

The last time we read anything about Junior is when Christine comes back home after Heed’s death, and finds her waiting at the house. But here, both Junior and Christine’s stories stop without revealing to us what happens to the two women. We are suddenly pushed back into L’s mind as she narrates of what happened to Cosey and of the woman who, through her hate, drove Heed and Christine definitively apart, May. Even if L vaguely hints at the fact that, even though Heed has died, the two friends are finally together again, Junior has completely disappeared and Christine, for all her loquaciousness, does not say another word until the end of the book.

From start to finish, Christine has been presented to us as this indomitable woman who does not care what others think of her, and that would take what she thinks she deserves without thinking about others. Christine is a character that takes control of the novel, forcing her way into people’s lives as well as their houses, even blatantly showing her rebellion against anyone and anything.

Much like Junior, her childhood has turned her jaded and selfish. The constant rejection of her grandfather, the loss of her true love, and the complete absence of a mother, have made her independent and completely in control of herself, but also desperately in need of acceptance and sincere and lasting love.

After being sent away by her grandfather and told not to come back by her mother, Christine falls into one flawed relationship after another, tying herself to men who treat her the same way Cosey treated her; like someone who could be disposed of any moment. It is a combination of two events – working at a brothel after she has been left by her current lover, and having the seventh abortion which sparks an interest in children in her – that makes her truly hit rock-bottom and pushes her to change.

Christine becomes the embodiment of a never-ending rage directed toward all those who have ever betrayed her, Heed in the first place, and at the world they live in, cruel enough to try and take everything away from her. It is at that point that she forces her way back into Heed's house, taking possession of it and holding tight onto it with everything she has. Like Junior, she does not hesitate in using people to get what she wants; an example of this is the excuse of having to take care of her mother – something she never would have done – to get back into Monarch Street.

Much like Heed, she will remain stuck in a sort of limbo in which she has to live with the person she hates the most fighting over a property that would never reach an end; a useless fight with an ending that benefits no one. Already in the middle of the book, we know that Christine's legal fight over the property of Monarch Street would yield no result, but we also get the first clue that what Christine truly wants is not Monarch Street but Heed, the one who used to be her best friend, "You don't know! You don't! She is replacing me! Wait now. She is! That's been her whole life, don't you get it? Replacing me, getting rid of me. I'm always last; all the time the one being told to go, get out" (Morrison, *Love* 95).

As we already know, Christine and Heed will find peace with each other before Heed's death, but the lack of a proper conclusion to Christine's narrative leaves us with the uncomfortable feeling

that nothing was truly solved. Both Heed and Christine wanted to find their way back to each other in the vain hope that they would recover the pure love they shared too. But Heed dies, and Christine is left to live with Junior, the one who caused Heed's death, without her friend's presence at her side – now truly alone in the world.

Christine does not say explicitly what she intends to do with Junior and L does not see it fit to tell us what Christine's future is going to be like. Thinking about late style artists and their rage at the impossibility to change anything in their life, makes us see this ending as a frustration of all that these women have done and fought for, instead of making us hope for something to change. Perhaps, this ambivalent ending is exactly what Morrison was aiming for, but it does make the struggle of these women pointless and fruitless.

Another character whose journey does not have a proper ending and who does not manage to find resolution in life, is Lina in *A Mercy* – again this lack of a narrative ending must not be confused with her lack of closure with the past. Lina is a character devoted to family, steady in her love and resourceful when it comes to her survival. What strikes more of her character and is easily picked up, is her quiet demeanor coupled with the silent strength she has developed losing her family and surviving the Presbyterians.

Her quiet nature makes it seem as though she is merely enduring life, accepting her fate and the end of her people, without offering any sort of resistance or anger at the way things are going. She is, of course, quite the opposite. Her resistance, her almost impossible to notice attempt at fighting back against what life has dealt her, is not immediately clear and needs to be searched for after a careful reading.

From the very moment Lina loses her family and is rescued by Europeans, her resistance – whether conscious or not – begins and continues throughout the book. Even after being taken in by Presbyterians who, as one of the first thing they do, give her a new – Christian – name and set to make of her an 'educated savage', in the hopes of redeeming her in spite of her origins, Lina does not abandon her culture.

The beliefs of her people are what define her and that is something which remains clear to us all throughout the story – she curses the man who abused her, she ‘senses’ wickedness in Sorrow that her ‘Europe’ masters ignore, and she lives as her people did out in the open air.

Lina, for all that she does consider Rebekka and Vaark as friends – as much as she can consider friends people who own her – does not allow them to change her way of life, nor does she go out of her way to help them when they refuse to listen to her warnings, “While Lina trusted more or less Sir’s and Mistress’ judgment, she did not trust their instincts. Had they true insight they would never have kept Sorrow so close” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 55). Her silent resistance to the world around her can be seen in the way she strives to pass on her knowledge of the world and nature to Florens, the little girl she considers her own.

The fact that she fights to keep Florens safe is something which stems from the maternal love she feels for the little girl, but it is also a way to rebel against the settlers who think they can erase her culture and substitute it with theirs.

By the end of the novel, however, all of Lina’s efforts result vain. Jacob’s death does not shock Lina too much – she had warned him of what would come out of his decision to cut trees to build a useless mansion, “Killing trees in that number, without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up malfortune” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 44). It is Rebekka’s illness, instead, that brings about chaos in her life. Lina loses Florens to the blacksmith as she had always feared and tried with all her might to prevent, and she loses too the chance to keep her people’s traditions alive since Florens is no longer interested in her teachings.

When Rebekka gains back her health, Lina will lose the few liberties she had been accustomed to. She is no longer allowed to sleep in a hammock – Rebekka sees that as something only a savage would do – and her friendship with her mistress – that almost put her in a position equal to Rebekka’s in status – simply vanishes.

The relationship between these two women who had learned early on that cooperation was the only way to survive, turns into a pale reflection of what it was before; the two barely work together to keep the farm going.

All in all, in the end, Lina's efforts – to preserve her culture, to resist European attempts at erasing her people, to raise someone who could pass on her knowledge – are all in vain as we do not even know what will happen to her in the future, though we can imagine it. There is no resolution for her; she fails in her objectives and her life turns out to have no meaning at all as she closes in on herself, keeping everyone, including Florens, at a distance.

Sorrow and Rebekka, in a fitting sort of irony, reach the end of their story with opposite results. Rebekka's one and only objective as she accepts to be married to Jacob, is to have a family of her own. To do so, she is more than willing to dirty her hands working alongside Jacob who – lucky her – actually loves her.

She is immediately described as a hard-working woman, kind in a way her parents never were, and that is exactly what she is striving to be – the opposite of her parents. She does not want to end up like them, nor does she want her children to, so she models her life in a completely opposite way. Where her parents were close-minded, extremely religious people who found a certain pleasure in violence, Rebekka is open to change, kind toward others, understanding, and not interested in religion.

She allows Lina to follow her people's belief undisturbed, and lends Florens her daughter's clothes even though parting with them is extremely hard for her. Up until she falls ill, it seems that her rebellion against the way her parents raised her to be, is successful – her children are all dead, but she is married to a loving husband and her life, for all that she is not rich, could have gone much worse.

After her sickness abandons her, however, it is as if her life has been turned upside down, leading her to become a woman her parents would have been proud of. She turns to religion in an almost obsessive manner that does remind of the way her parents used to speak of it; she prevents

Lina from continuing to live as her people used to, and starts treating her slaves as such, even going so far as trying to sell Florens.

In the end, all her willingness not to become like her parents means nothing, as she fails completely in her efforts. Her rebellion against them and their teachings is futile, as, without a husband, she cannot possibly live the free and content life she had hoped to achieve in the New World. What is worse, in my opinion, Rebekka turns into an exact replica of her parents, spreading their hatred into the farm that used to represent a safe haven for the orphans who lived there.

Sorrow, on the other hand, does achieve what she hoped for; she gives birth to a daughter she names Complete, finally leaving behind her the life of solitude she lived before. Even coming to live at the farm had not afforded her companionship and the love Lina and Florens had found. Sorrow, for all her apathy in dealing with the world and her disregard for every task assigned to her first by the couple who rescued her, then by Jacob Vaark, does come alive and does find a purpose in a world that would have probably claimed her life.

The first time she shows initiative and will to fight for herself, is when she has to give birth to her daughter - and even that took the death of her first son for her to learn that she could not trust Lina, “Mistress was not well enough to help her, and remembering the yawn, she did not trust Lina” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 132). Alone in the woods, by the water where she had lived all her life, she gives birth to the daughter that makes her complete, with only the help of two men in her time of need.

The way Sorrow dedicates herself completely to her daughter, transformed by this birth in a completely different person than the one we knew, makes us believe that Sorrow’s attempt at creating a life for herself was successful. Even so, we cannot help but wonder whether that is the truth or not. Sorrow has changed, that is true, dedicating herself completely to the new life she brought into the world, but is she doing the right thing or is she dooming her daughter to the same solitude she had to cope with?

Isolating herself from the other occupants of the farm is perhaps the smartest move for Sorrow – she knows firsthand how dangerous those people can be – but her daughter risks to find herself

completely incapable of dealing with the rest of the world, thus making Sorrow's efforts useless in the long run.

Florens is by far the most complicated character to analyze in *A Mercy*. It is easy to understand that her one desire is to belong to someone who will not put her aside, who will provide for her a stable environment in which she will not have to fear going through the ordeal of being rejected by the one she loves as it happened when she was a child. Her mother's rejection, something Florens cannot see for what it truly was – the mercy the title refers to – is like a shadow hanging over her life. The only way she has to feel safe, is to belong to a free man like the blacksmith.

Before meeting the blacksmith, Florens hangs around Lina, learning from her everything she could, though admitting that she could not 'read' as well as Lina does everything nature has to say, a reflection of how "her development was arrested at the time her mother cast her aside" (Wyatt 135), leaving her unable to properly grow and mature. Although her relationship with Lina is far more stable than the one she has with the blacksmith – her devotion to him is not in question, though his commitment cannot be considered sure – Lina is in the same position as Florens' mother was; she has no control over herself and others around her.

Florens does not want to ever have to find herself in the same situation as when she was a child, and this fear is stronger than anything else. Florens does love Lina, but as soon as the situation allows it – Rebekka's sickness can only be cured by the blacksmith, and Florens is the only one who can go fetch him – she does not hesitate in leaving her, and in fact her whole life at the farm, behind. Reaching the blacksmith and being with him is the only thing that matters, the only way she has to rebel against the events surrounding her.

Yet, even the plan that seemed perfect – find the blacksmith and never go back – in the end fails. When she reaches him, she finds out that he has taken in a small boy – Florens' nightmare – and plans on taking care of him. Left alone with him, Florens hurts the child she cannot even bear to see.

Even if she claims that her intention was not to hurt the boy, the violence she used in grabbing him by the arm betrays her last effort to eliminate him and secure her place by the blacksmith's side, because "he is in the place next to the parent/lover's body, the place where Florens wants to be, there is no place for Florens, who must be cast out" (Wyatt 135).

Of course, the blacksmith finds out what she has done and she is cast aside once again, but this time because of her own fault not because of inevitable circumstances. With nowhere to go, she returns to the farm and at this point, we no longer know what she is thinking as we only see her through the eyes of other characters. It is clear that she has closed herself off completely, even from Lina, and that she has become impossible to get close to, "The instant he saw her marching down the road – whether ghost or soldier – he knew she had become untouchable" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 152).

The only thing Florens can do after her struggle to find a way to be safe has revealed itself to be completely useless, is to write down her story – what, at the beginning, she calls a confession – in the hopes that someone, ideally the blacksmith, would read it.

The problem with Florens is that telling her story to someone, while being an act that could potentially allow her to start over with a superior understanding of what happened, becomes useless the moment she writes it down inside Jacob's abandoned mansion, a place no one but Sorrow – who cannot read – visits, thus making Florens' effort to free herself and change her life, or her understanding of it, impossible to realize. As Wyatt correctly states in her book, "A message gains its meaning only in the transmission, only as it moves from sender to receiver; this message is going nowhere. Spatialized, written on walls closed in on themselves, these signifiers are visible only to each other – and signifiers cannot read" (136).

The situation is somewhat more complicated in *Home*. Frank's PTSD leads us to believe that the death of his childhood friends in Korea represents the problem he has to face to take back control over his life and change the way his future is likely to unfold if he does not do something about it. If this were the case, then the responsibility of finding his sister Cee, rescue her and do so without

resorting to the natural response ingrained in him because of his time in the army – namely resorting to violence – would put him on the right path to recovery and redemption.

We know from past memories and from what Frank himself tells us, that after coming back home, he lets himself go not even trying to figure out what he can do. Because of this, his decision to go help Cee no matter what, signals his attempt at recovery, and the promise he made himself not to use violence is a sign of his change.

It would be logical to assume that this is the central focus of the story, making it follow the usual course of the damsel in distress saved by the hero who reaches his redemption through the act of saving someone else; the only plot twist here would be that the hero and the damsel are actually siblings. But at the end of the story, Frank reveals to us that his trauma, while obviously being caused in part by his friends dying, is centered around the fact that he killed a Korean girl because he had been tempted to accept her sexual advances in exchange for food. The revelation changes completely the way we have to consider Frank as a character.

If what led Frank to find redemption in Cee's rescue, made up for the terrible time he spent in Korea watching his friends die, his actions become completely useless when it comes to making up for the child he murdered. The fact is that Frank does not confess his deepest sin to anyone but to the implied writer of the story, and us readers by extension, thus making it impossible for him to actually change as he has yet to admit out loud what he has done, "I lied to you and I lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me. [...] I shot the Korean girl in her face" (Morrison, *Home* 133).

In light of this revelation, all that he has done, even if it was a step in the right direction, appears useless as he cannot possibly solve a problem he is not willing to face. Saving Cee does not even bring the calm and stability he hoped to regain by going back to old routines, as Cee is now an adult woman ready to face her faults and stand back up on her own this time, strong enough to live by herself. Cee's growth into a woman capable of taking care of herself leaves Frank at a loss as his identity "is dependent on Cee's lack of identity, on her remaining an 'absence' to herself" (Wyatt 162).

Frank's last attempt at fixing what he can fix at this point in the story, is taking the body of the man he and his sister saw being buried when they were children, and deciding to bury him properly this time, like a man, "Here stands a man" (Morrison, *Home* 145). Perhaps subconsciously, Frank was trying to bury the Korean girl too. Maybe that is why the man dressed in white finally disappears from his life, the man we are pushed to connect to the corpse Frank and Cee saw at the beginning of the novel and that we now know "belonged to a black man forced to provide entertainment for a white male audience by fighting his son to the death with knives" (Wyatt 166). But one cannot help but wonder how this burial could hold any meaning – Cee excluded – considering it is performed without having had the courage to truly face one's sin.

Frank is an extremely complex character, and the fact that the man describing facts and situations to us is so damaged makes it hard for us to judge him without fault. Still, reaching the end of this novel together with him and his sister, after everything that has happened to both of them, the thought comes unbidden: has Frank truly done anything to move on with his life, or is everything he went through to save Cee been for nothing at the end of the day?

Things get even more complicated when we move to a character like Cee. Looking at her story and how it develops throughout the book, Cee seems to be the only character that succeeds in bringing about change in her life – not by her own choice – and finds a way to secure herself a better future than she could have expected.

Cee starts as nothing more than Frank's shadow, always hiding behind him as he protected her from everyone and anything. Frank's leaving and joining the army forces Cee to stand up for herself and deal with the rest of the world on her own. Her failed marriage to Prince is to be expected of a girl with no world experience, as is her decision to accept a job at the doctor's mansion even though she really should have known better.

Cee initially blames her brother's overprotection and her own ignorance in worldly matters for her almost death. She ends up needing her brother to save her once again from those who could

harm her, and then she has to depend on the kindness and healing knowledge of the town's women if she wants to survive.

It is in this moment, as all the women take turns healing her each with their own traditional remedy, that Cee realizes that even though these women all come from backgrounds similar to hers, it does not stop them from gaining their own knowledge based on the kind of life they have led.

At this point, Cee seems to reach the conclusion of her story; once healed, as much as she possibly can, by the women of the town, she finally understands that everything Lenore has said throughout her childhood is not true, and it certainly cannot prevent her from making something out of herself. The realization comes to her that it were not so much Lenore's words, but her own conviction that those words were true, that led her to let herself down to the point of almost dying. She needs to stop believing what Lenore said and start believing in what she herself thinks of herself; ultimately, the power is in her own hands, "I ain't going nowhere, Miss Ethel. This is where I belong" (Morrison, *Home* 126).

Looking at Cee this way, it seems as though she is the only winner in the story; her naiveté resulted in her being incapable of having children, but she also fully grew into herself and found a way to take care of herself.

However, when one considers that Cee's aim was to prove to herself, Lenore, and even Frank that she could live by herself without needing anyone, in the end she completely fails in this endeavor. Not only she is forced to go back to the hometown she loathes, but the fact that she is physically incapable of having a family of her own means that, once again, she will have to remain with her brother while conscious of no longer being in need of his protection. And despite how Wyatt affirms that "Rather than collapsing, as one might expect, the relation between brother and sister becomes fruitful" (Wyatt 161), the fact that Frank, unlike Cee, has not grown out of his 'protector' mentality seems to foreshadow an ill cohabitation.

Furthermore, judging by the last interaction between Cee and Frank, apart from one instance in which Cee is the one in control of the situation, "I can be miserable if I want to. You don't need to

try and make it go away. It shouldn't go away. It's just as sad as it ought to be and I'm not going to hide from what's true just because it hurts" (Morrison, *Home* 131), their way of communicating seems to go back to the way they had back in their childhood, with Frank leading and Cee following behind him.

As I have written in an earlier chapter, Cee herself notices how she is slipping back into old patterns, but she seems to believe that this is the last time she will let him dictate what she has to do. The fact, however, that she caved when he demanded to use the very first quilt – something she treasured and that somehow symbolized her new found independence – makes me believe that Cee will not really learn to stop her brother from telling her what to do and how to live her life, even if he is not doing it with ill intentions.

In the end, Cee's aim of wanting to be by herself is not something she is capable of accomplishing, leading her back to the way things were.

Booker's entire story in *God Help the Child* is a vain battle against something simply impossible to change; death. His hold onto his brother's memory is so strong that he annuls himself and practically takes on his brother's life making it his own. Toni Morrison only gives us one chapter in Booker's point of view, thus only giving us one chance to try and understand him, but it is clear how his brother's death changes him and makes him lose his way.

Even though he seems intellectually gifted, he chooses to make a living playing the trumpet in a small band. He appears apathetic, only engaging with life again when Bride first comes into it. His relationship with her, however, simply cannot work because of his lack of communication; while Bride shares her past with him, Booker simply keeps it to himself, unwilling to open up and potentially share his brother with someone else. Not only that, he seems completely removed from the rest of the world around him; when Brooklyn strips in front of him and tries to seduce him while he is still resting in Bride's bed, he appears completely unfazed by what just happened, rejecting Brooklyn with harsh words that lack any heat.

It is as if Adam's death and Booker's following decision to drag his dead brother with him wherever he goes, have somehow erected a wall between him and his emotions. When Bride forces him to face the fact that he is only using his brother's memory as an excuse not to live to his full potential, Booker appears to understand that his way of living life up until that moment had been wrong. His final conversation with his Aunt Queen finally frees him from the weight she had placed on his shoulders because of poorly chosen words. Or so it seems.

In her book, Jean Wyatt does a marvelous job at explaining the root cause of Booker's apathy, of his lack of engagement with the rest of the world. By recalling how Aunt Queen scolds Booker for the way he has allowed his brother's death to take over his life, "You called Adam back and made his murder turn your brain into a cadaver and your heart's blood formaldehyde" (Morrison, *God Help the Child*), Wyatt interprets Booker through Freud's theory of the melancholic, someone who "identifies with the lost beloved, making him or her part of the ego" (Wyatt 178). This description fits exactly what Booker has done with his brother upon his Aunt's encouragement. However, this 'strategy' is not without risks, as Wyatt goes on to explain, "The chief problem with the strategy of the melancholic is that the mourner's energy is withdrawn from external pursuits and directed toward the maintenance of the dead within. So if the dead is suspended in a kind of living death, the mourner too lives a suspended life-in-death, his or her vital energies drained away in the effort to sustain the beloved" (Wyatt 179). This incorporation of his brother within him, serves as an explanation even for his failure at maintaining a long-term relationship with anyone, stopping at superficial ones that will not reach the point of questioning his detachment from the world.

Aunt Queen almost dies in a house fire and when Bride stays with him at the hospital, unwilling to leave the woman alone, Booker goes back to the way he was before by closing himself off and keeping Bride at arm's length. Aunt Queen dies, and Booker chooses – rightly so – to honor her in his own way and by himself – he is the only member of her family still willing to be near her.

However, when he gets back into the car where Bride is patiently waiting for him, and tells him that she is pregnant with his baby, his "it's ours" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 174) does not

sound as reassuring as it should. A moment earlier – during Aunt Queen’s funeral – Booker had thrown away the trumpet he had started playing for his brother, symbolically letting go of Adam. In this context, one is lead to think that Booker is finally ready to start a new life with Bride, free of Adam’s shadow.

Because of the noticeable lack of communication between him and Bride – they hardly speak to each other in the last pages of the book – that is not the case. Everything is made worse by the fact that Sweetness underlines the distinct lack of any mention of a father for Bride’s child. Of course this, as I have already said, could be something done on purpose by Bride, but it could also mean that Booker was not capable of building himself a new life. It could meant that change for him was unattainable.

Bride is not so different in her way of dealing with her desire to change. Wanting to make amends for what she has done so that she can enforce a positive change in her life is something of a staple of Bride’s character and story arc. Her attempts to fix what she has done are childish and inappropriate – money and make-up cannot give back to Sofia 15 years of her life – but they show a desire to better herself and to change what life gave her.

Hers is a rebellion to avoid becoming like her mother. When she was just a little girl, Bride saw their landlord rape a little boy. When she told her mother what she saw Sweetness harshly reprimanded her and ordered her to keep everything to herself, “When I told Sweetness what I’d seen, she was furious. Not about the crying little boy, but about spreading the story. [...]. She said, ‘Don’t you say a word about it. Not to anybody, you hear me, Lula? Forget it. Not a single word’” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 54-55).

Testifying the false to gain her mother’s approval, while appearing like a good idea to the child she was, equates her to the woman she hates the most and never wants to be like, her mother Sweetness. For this reason, apologizing to Sofia is for Bride the chance to set herself apart from her mother and fully become her own person, free to go on with her life.

As we know, her plan fails setting her back, the situation only aggravated by Booker leaving her, prompting her to revert back to the scared little girl she used to be – not only mentally, but physically as well. Realizing her mistake in wanting to apologize to a woman she can never actually repay for what she has done, Bride sets off to find Booker with the clear intention of getting “an explanation more than a reunion, so she can understand better what it means to her to be, once again, the one who isn’t ‘wanted’” (Wyatt 183), and then move on.

The closer she gets to her destination, however, the more her body starts to resemble that of a child – a perfect instance of magical realism as Toni Morrison does not offer an explanation for this change in her body, nor do the other characters seem to notice or question what is happening to Bride. At this point, confronting Booker, standing up for herself and defending her choices, are the only possibilities she has left, the only way she has to “understand her relationship and its abrupt ending and thereby understand more about herself and her life” (Wyatt 183).

Once she reaches the small town where Booker returned to, she meets his aunt, Queen, who gives her some insight into who Booker is and only cements Bride’s decision to go to him. As expected, the argument between them escalates to the point of physical violence, but it is only the intervention of Aunt Queen that truly resolves the problem. Furthermore, it is Aunt Queen’s death that brings about both Bride’s and Booker’s chance at a new life.

While saving Queen from the fire, Bride realizes that her body has gone back to normal, “As the ambulance parked, the crowd became bigger and some of the onlookers seemed transfixed – but not at the moaning patient being trundled into the ambulance. They were focused, wide-eyed, on Bride’s lovely, plump breasts. However pleased the onlookers were it was zero compared to Bride’s delight” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 165-166). It is tending to Aunt Queen as she lays in a hospital bed that has Bride and Booker rekindling their relationship. It is Aunt Queen’s death that signals the start of a new life for them.

If the novel ended here, we would be right in assuming that Bride was successful in her attempt at changing her life, but the novel does not end here. We are not told anything of Bride and Booker’s

life, and we do not even know if they remain together or split apart. As such, we only have Sweetness' words to try and understand what happens between them.

The only certainty we have is that Bride has a child, but that is it. The way Sweetness ends the novel by saying, referring to Bride and Booker's relationship and hope for the future in their child, "Good luck and God help the child" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 178), sounds ominous to our ears. Those words cannot but make us wonder if the story has come full circle, with a mother abandoned by her lover to raise a little girl all by herself, in a world that still does not fully accept her, making Bride unable to differentiate herself from her mother.

## Part II

## Introduction

Said's book on late style was published in 2006, but Said had been working on it since the end of the 80s. We know that he was not the first to reflect on late style in artists – Adorno limited himself to Beethoven's music but he did work on it – and he certainly will not be the last, as scholars all over the world, fascinated by the subject, keep publishing new articles and essays on this matter.

Unfortunately, Said never managed to complete his research on late style as he died of leukemia; a close friend of his then organized and edited his papers to have them published as a collection of essays. Even if Said never finished his research, what he wrote is more than enough to understand his thoughts on late style, and the characteristics he individuated to help classify works of art as belonging to this particular category or not.

Said's research cannot be considered comprehensive as he did focus mainly on music, dedicating only a minor part of his research to literature, and he never even breached the subject of visual arts. But what is, by far, the greatest omission in his collection of essays, is the lack of any research on female authors. This lack of even a passing reference could very well depend on the fact that Said died before completing his work, but it may also depend on the belief of there being a universal quality to late style that remains unchanged for men and women. While there can be no doubt that men and women approaching the end of their life, or their career, in all probability will face most of the same problems and emotional turmoil, I reckon that their mental state and, most importantly, the way they will react to their impending death, is extremely different.

Men and women cannot be thought as one and the same because, while similarities between the two abound, there are fundamental differences in male and female thought-processes, in their way of handling different situations as they arise, that cannot be ignored or swept under the carpet for the sake of one's theory. These differences stem from the distinct roles that men and women filled in the course of history, and from the ways in which society has defined gender roles. In my opinion, though,

these differences also stem from natural characteristics that simply belong to men or women, and that centuries of social conditioning and the division of society in specific gender roles cannot influence or modify.

In the first part of this thesis, I have illustrated how it is possible to insert Toni Morrison's last four published novels in the main categories of late style as defined by Edward Said in his collection of essays. These main categories, four of them, can be described as such: the inescapable tie to one's past, leading to a state of nostalgia and a desire to escape in the past because of an ill-fitting present; the absence of closure in one's life, precluding one from being capable of building a future for oneself; the denial of death, its disappearance to avoid having to deal with it and accept it; and the almost maniac urge to enact a change in one's life in the face of an ever-closer end, that ends in non sequiturs as there can be no transcendence in late style.

As I have shown in the first part of this thesis, it is possible to read Toni Morrison's late novels through these categories. Her novels do present many of the themes that Said highlighted as signs of an artist's late style; death is a permanent fixture in almost all Morrison's novels, not only the late ones, and, to borrow T.S. Elliott's words, "the presentness of the past" is something easy to notice in her stories. But these categories do feel too narrow when applied to themes so densely packed with details and layers upon layers of characters' depth. This feeling of narrowness, I reckon, comes from the fact that Said's categories of late style were developed by taking into consideration exclusively men's way of dealing, or not dealing, with their own demise. When one reads *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, it is impossible not to notice how the only examples Said used were focused on male writers or musicians, and how the main protagonists of the works produced by these men, were other men.

Said is not the only scholar culpable of this myopia when it comes to female artists in the context of late style. Of the many articles on late style one can find through a simple online search, only one or two of them actually use women when analyzing late style – of these, I can only think of

John Updike's article on *The New Yorker*, and even he only wrote a brief paragraph on the late style in Iris Murdoch.

Because of this lack of research, one has to start wondering whether these scholars believe that late style does not vary between men and women, or whether no one has simply breached the subject yet. And if one does believe that women deal with their mortality and with the end of their productive life in terms of artistic production in a different way, then it becomes necessary to reflect on what could cause this difference in the way men and women confront their last years and where do these differences originate from.

It is known and accepted as truth that in society, whether in the modern or the ancient ones, men are raised to be independent, to be defined only by themselves, and to make of themselves the center of their own world upon which all else is then built. Because of this, when the end of their world comes closer, it elicits a negative response in the form of crippling melancholy, refusal of accepting the end, desperation for a change that will not, and indeed cannot, happen. When Adorno analyzed Beethoven's late style with its complications, its incompleteness, and its total lack of cooperation, he unknowingly hit the mark when he affirmed, as reported in Said's collection of essays,

Thus the power of Beethoven's late style is negative, or rather *negativity*: where one would expect serenity and maturity, one instead finds a bristling, difficult, and unyielding – perhaps even inhuman – challenge. “The maturity of the late works,” Adorno says, “does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are...not round but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation (12).

When someone is one's own world, then there can be nothing else beyond it and its end is truly final in every sense of the word.

Women on the contrary, have always been raised to rely on others, to make themselves small, making it so as their world does not begin and end with themselves, but instead stretches to include others as well. But it is more than that. Women are taught never to be defined by themselves; they are mothers, sisters, daughters, never just themselves and because they are not the center of their own

world, because they are not just limited by their own self-definition, Said's categories are insufficient in defining their reaction to the approaching of their own end.

Toni Morrison is a woman who talks and writes about women, about their lives, their problems, their struggles, their journey to self-definition whether successful or not. Said's categories, focused on a negative reaction to death, as he himself stated, "But what of artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction? What if age and ill health don't produce the serenity of 'ripeness is all?'" (7), can account for some of the themes that can be individuated in Toni Morrison's late novels, but they fail, I feel, to appreciate and enhance the meaning behind Toni Morrison's choice of themes and her realistic characters. To appreciate fully Toni Morrison's late style, one must go beyond the categories of late style created by Said and think of new ones that will be much more suitable to the late style experienced by a woman who still has much to say in life as long as she can keep writing,

I'm a little leery of that inspiration stuff, I don't need it. I know what to do. And I know how to do it. And I don't like the world when I am not doing it. When I'm not writing? Ugh! [...]. But if I get an idea, like I have in every book I've ever written, some compelling idea that has some kind of meaning. [...]. Then the whole world is such a lovely place, I cannot begin to tell you how fascinating, how overwhelming, and lovely it is to be here (Talks at Google, *youtube.com*, 00:37:55-00:38:51).

There must be new categories that take into account the possibility of women facing the last years of their life in a completely different state of mind than that displayed by men.

Analyzing Toni Morrison's novels through the lenses of Said's late style, there are differences not only in themes, but writing tones and form as well that must be addressed if we wish to understand what Toni Morrison wishes to communicate by putting her characters through these specific situations until they reach these specific endings.

Where Said found negativity, Toni Morrison offers us characters that are undoubtedly tied to their past, defined but not limited by it. These characters are still perfectly capable of living their lives, learning from their pasts and, if we do not let ourselves be influenced by Said's way of reading their experiences, capable of moving on from it, full of possibilities, "The past colors the present, and the present contorts the past. So, that's life and you have to live it like that" (Manufacturing Intellect, *youtube.com* 00:50:19-00:50:26). There is hope in each of these characters, in each of their stories, a hope that, in the end, everything will have been worth it as they will be able not to repeat the mistakes they made.

By reading Toni Morrison's novels in this way, her use of the open ending is even more relevant than before, as she literally provides us with stories that do not truly end as soon as her characters have moved through the story and reached their objective. Toni Morrison's decision to not end her stories, instead leaving us and her own characters, on the cusp of something more, creates an opening in her late style instead of nipping any possibility for the future at the bud.

## Chapter 2.1

If we read *Love* through Said's categories of late style, then, as I have illustrated in the first part of the thesis, Heed and Christine's story cannot be considered as anything other than a tragedy where the two women are forced apart by May and Bill Cosey and never truly find each other again. In between them, Junior, who does not even have a proper conclusion to her story, finds herself trapped in a limbo where all the possibilities in her cannot be realized. This, though, is something that happens only if we consciously try to force Said's particular brand of late style, and if we interpret Heed, Christine, and Junior as self-centered characters with only their interests, their lives, their success at the top of their mind.

However, if we discard these assumptions, and instead we start from the aforementioned assumption that women are inherently other-centered, *Love* takes on a completely different tone. Heed and Christine, from beginning to end, fight one another for the title of "My sweet Cosey child" (Morrison, *Love* 88), with which Cosey designated the person he wished to inherit the house on Monarch Street. Heed needs it to consolidate her position as a Cosey, to finally claim her family; Christine needs it to reclaim, to make her own again, her family, the same family that had practically abandoned her.

When I analyzed these two stories through Said's categories of late style, they seemed to never reach an end as Heed dies before she can find out if she is the Cosey child mentioned in the will, and Christine loses the one family member she has left. However, this is only if we consider these two characters as separate entities, with separate objectives. But that is not the case. Heed and Christine cannot be considered as two different characters, and this is something made clear by all the characters in the story. By the end of the novel, we know that these two women were best friends as little girls, and probably would have remained so if not for the interference first of Bill Cosey, then of May who pushed them down separate roads.

But even early on in the story, there are clues to indicate how the love everyone believed had vanished is still very much present between them, “Once there was a little girl with white bows on each of her four plaits. She had a bedroom all to herself beneath the attic in a big hotel. Forget-me-nots dotted the wallpaper. Sometimes she let her brand-new friend stay over and they laughed till they hiccupped under the sheets.” (Morrison, *Love* 95). The decades long fight between them cannot be explained simply by materialistic objectives, as the two of them, in practical terms, already are in control of the Mansion and the Hotel without the need of a piece of paper to say so. Their fight can only be explained by their wounded love.

Heed and Christine belonged to one another, L herself gives us insight on this by describing their friendship as children with these words,

If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. Heed and Christine found such a one.

Most people have never felt a passion that strong, that early. If so, they remember it with a smile, dismiss it as a crush that shriveled in time and on time. It’s hard to think of it any other way when real life shows up with its list of other people, its swarm of other thoughts. [...]. You never know who or when it will hit or if it can stay the road. One thing is true – it bears watching, if you can stand to look at it. Heed and Christine were the kind of children who can’t take back love, or park it. When that’s the case separation cuts to the bone. And if the break-up is plundered too, squeezed for a glimpse of blood, shed for the child’s own good, then it can ruin a mind. And if, on top of that, they are made to hate each other, it can kill a life before it tries to live. I blame May for the hate she put in them, but I have to fault Mr. Cosey for the theft. (Morrison, *Love* 199-200).

They were each other’s worlds and because their pure love was tainted by Bill Cosey’s depravity and May’s wickedness, these two girls lost themselves.

This way, their continuous fights, verbal and physical ones, are the only way they have to try and reestablish contact with one another. It is a way to deal with their need as twisted as Cosey and May made them, by forcibly removing the focus of Heed and Christine's worlds. Their story is made more tragic by the fact that neither of them seems capable of identifying what it is that they miss from their life, instead flailing around in search of something they know they miss but cannot identify. This inability to fully understand their situation, as Wyatt brilliantly explains in her book, stems from Bill Cosey's introduction of sex too early into the life of two little girls, thus disrupting their relation to temporality, "From the time that Heed is untimely jolted into the world of sexuality and marriage up until the present, when the women are in their sixties, she and Christine occupy a world of patriarchal meanings that precludes their understanding of what the loss of their friendship means to them; they can only see each other as rivals" (Wyatt 99).

Christine is the one who comes closer to identifying the source of her anguish by arguing with her lawyer, but it will not be until Heed is on the brink of death that the two women finally realize what it is that they need to find their peace. Although the end of the novel seems not to solve anything when approached through Said's categories, by keeping in mind that we are considering women's nature of being other-centered, the ending of the novel takes on a completely different meaning.

Heed and Christine's conversation takes on the form of a cleansing confession, with the telltale smell of bread signaling L's presence in the room where the two women finally talk, thereby making of L "the tutelary spirit of the recovered world of girlfriend love" (Wyatt 116). By admitting to each other what happened on the day they first kept a secret one from the other, they are finally capable to recuperate the love they shared shrugging off all the secrets, the misunderstandings, and the meanness that piled up on top of that first mistake, "I called you a fool but I was jealous too. The excitement and all. It had that. You sound sad. No. It's just. Well, it's like we started out being sold, got free of it, then sold ourselves to the highest bidder. Who you mean 'we'? Black people? Women? You mean me and you? I don't know what I mean", (Morrison, *Love* 185).

Heed dies but her reunion with Christine is complete. Already during their conversation, the dialogue between the two women had taken on the form almost of a mental conversation. If in that context of confessions and redemption, this formal choice could be considered as simply wanting to convey their return to their shared innocence as children, the fact that it continues even after Heed's death signals how, at last, they have become one again, fulfilling their heart's desire.

Junior, in being the sum of Heed and Christine in one character – as I affirmed in my reading of the novel through Said's categories –, finds herself in a similar situation. Since birth, she has felt the lack of a father figure in her life, always sure that if she waited long enough he would come back to her. Soon enough, even the one friend she had managed to make at school is taken away from her, her family pushing her away when she refuses to lower herself to their level. Fleeing from the Settlement is what allows her to 'meet' her Good Man, the spirit to which she latches onto to fill the need she has for companionship.

Junior, throughout the novel, is constantly kept from expanding her world, forced to be by herself first because the Settlement has nothing to offer her, then because even if Correctional actually helped her in life, it did nothing to lessen her loneliness. Perhaps that is why, when she reaches Monarch Street with the help of her Good Man, she is completely focused on the materialistic part of life. Her thoughts are all directed at the house she wants to claim for herself from the very beginning until close to the end.

The introduction of Romen in her life is what ends up being exactly what she needed to start truly living her life. If at first she only uses Romen for her own pleasure – straight up considering him a gift for her –, he then becomes the partner that she had been searching for since the day she left the Settlement.

Romen, for all that he too accepts the relationship between the two of them on a purely physical level – that is all he thinks about, "Not only did she want him; she demanded him. Her craving was equal to his and his was bottomless. He could barely remember himself before November 12", (Morrison, *Love* 113-114) – he does show signs of feeling something for her if given the time

and the chance to expand on those feelings (think of the moment he kissed her ruined toes, the part of her that symbolizes the brutality of her life at the Settlement).

Incapable of finding companionship in anyone other than her Good Man – her ‘relationship’ with him is a poor substitute for the real one she wishes in her life – Junior focuses entirely on her plan to claim Monarch Street for herself. Her plan would have probably been a success as both Heed and Christine were left stranded in the old Hotel, but Junior ends up confessing what she has done as Romen’s gesture has for her the implication of that something she had been missing.

Much like with Heed and Christine, the analysis on Junior’s journey in the first part of this thesis seemed to indicate that her story does not end – the novel closes with Christine coming back home, arguing with Heed about what to do with Junior – her story does actually reached an end. Junior started out as a woman constantly on the search for that person who would offer her companionship, not exclusively in the form of a romantic relationship, also as an expression of acceptance of who she is. Her first bond is with the boy from school who was not interested in her being from the Settlement. When that relationship was taken from her, she latched onto the spirit of Bill Cosey, believing him to be the only one who would not leave her, on top of – in a twisted way – fulfilling both the role of father and lover. What is interesting here is that her Good Man is not taken from her, he simply disappears and in his place, Junior now has a more complete relationship with Romen who showed acceptance of her without reservations.

Even if we do not know what will happen between her and Romen, we do know that now Junior has finally found what can fill the void in her. The shift is subtle, but it is there. At her core, Junior is a selfish character, yet when she confesses to Romen what she has done and he goes to rescue the two Cosey girls, Junior decides to remain in the house and wait for Christine to return. Her change is further underlined by her refusal to look for Bill Cosey, “She didn’t want to see the Good Man or sniff out his aftershave” (Morrison, *Love* 196). At the end of the novel, Junior has finally a world of possibilities in front of her, that Christine seems willing to allow her, “Should we let her go, little rudderless, homeless thing? We could let her stay, under certain circumstances. What difference

would it make? To me? None. Do *you* want her around? What for? I got you. She knows how to make trouble. So do we. Hey, Celestial” (Morrison, *Love* 198).

The four women in *A Mercy* showcase this characteristic of women finding their definition through their relationships with others, both for better and for worse. In this regard, *A Mercy* offers the perfect representation of both scenarios concerning women’s focus on others instead of themselves. Rebekka and Lina, through their lives, represent the danger in entrusting themselves completely to others, relying exclusively on other people to define themselves. Both Rebekka and Lina’s motivations for relying on others to survive are completely reasonable and sharable.

As I have illustrated in previous chapters, both of them lose their families early on in life, losing the basic defining connection between mother and daughter, leaving them vulnerable. Rebekka finds the person who will fill the void in her in Jacob, while Lina will lean both on Rebekka herself, and on Florens who “awakens a maternal instinct in Lina” (Kakutani, *nytimes.com*), and represents the only chance for her to pass on her knowledge. Both approaches seem to work perfectly for a long time. Rebekka leaves England with high hopes, and I deem it worth mentioning the scene where Rebekka meets a group of women, each ruined in her own way, as she sails from the old continent to the new one. There is immediate companionship between these women, all beaten down by life and yet ready to start a new one in a place none of them has ever even seen before,

Together they lightened the journey; made it less hideous than it surely would have been without them. Their alehouse wit, their know-how laved with their low expectation of others and high levels of self-approval their quick laughter, amused and encouraged Rebekka. If she had feared her own female vulnerability, traveling alone to a foreign country to wed a stranger, these women corrected her misgivings. If ever night moths fluttered in her chest at the recollection of her mother’s predictions, the company of these exiled, thrown-away women eliminated them (Morrison, *A Mercy* 83)

It is through these women that Rebekka receives her cautionary tale about men and also finds the strength to confront her new situation.

Jacob, as soon as they meet, reveals himself to be the perfect man for Rebekka, with his lack of religiosity and his need for a wife willing to dirty her hands to work with him on the farm. Rebekka's wish to have a family of her own, unfortunately never comes true; all her children die still infants. Even so, it is clear that Rebekka defines herself primarily through Jacob. Her life starts to crumble as soon as she notices that he is losing himself in his new obsession to gain more and more wealth, "tempted by the invisible hand of this new market, not least because geography salves his 'liberal' conscience" (Adams, *theguardian.com*), and in his futile endeavor to build a house no one will inherit. To further show Rebekka's total dependence on Jacob, immediately after his death, she falls ill with the exact same affliction, "Still, we do not say the word out loud until we bury him next to his children and Mistress notices two in her mouth. That is the one time we whisper it. Pox. After we say it the next morning, the two on her tongue are joined by twenty-three on her face" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 37).

During her time spent in bed sick she hallucinates about the same women who had shared her journey to the new world and in a supernatural conversation, they share the stories of what their future was like once reached their destinations; one of them is dead, another is a prostitute, another became the wife of a pastor. All of them, Rebekka included, became women for and of men, forfeiting themselves in virtue of their ties to their husbands.

Upon waking up, Rebekka is no longer the woman she was before, "the death of three infant children and of a five-year-old daughter, and her husband's untimely death, takes to her bed in despair" (Updike, *TheNewYorker.com*); her life, lived for Jacob, now amounts to nothing. She has no children, no husband, and no will to rebuild her life again.

Lina is much the same; she too needs someone else by her side to keep on living. Eradicated from her own world, the death of her entire village described by Adams as "a fall from the Eden of her childhood" (Adams, *theguardian.com*) in his review of the novel, Lina finds it in herself to keep

on living, surviving any way she can. Her time spent with the Presbyterians is all about learning how to survive in a new world that follows a completely new set of rules and a new culture. She has no real tie to the Presbyterians; the problems for Lina begin when she allows herself to settle in with the Vaarks, forging new bonds with the people living there.

She owes her survival to the Vaarks keeping her there and she does define herself compared to them; but where her focus truly lies is with Florens. Florens is but a child when Lina meets her and immediately starts taking care of her, and Florens' need for a maternal figure in her life is probably what draws them to each other, "But the ice comes first, he says. And when I see knives of it hanging from the houses and trees and feel the white air burn my face I am certain the fire is coming. Then Lina smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 8). Lina takes her under her wing, and makes it her mission to teach her everything she possibly can, to protect her from any danger and from anything that could take Florens from her.

Lina's world might not have begun with Florens, but it does end with her, and that is clear in the vehemence with which she tries to keep both Sorrow and the blacksmith as far away from her as possible. Jacob's death completely obliterates Lina's world. Rebekka, who had been her friend up until that moment, turns in what is an exact copy of the Presbyterians in the way she treats not only Lina, but all the other slaves too. Rebekka had been one of the pillars upon which Lina had built her new life, finding in her someone who could understand the importance of working together in a hostile world, someone with whom she could learn how to live again. That Rebekka, initially jealous of Lina's relationship with Jacob, had learned to appreciate everything Lina could share of what she had learned with her people. The Rebekka that emerges after she lost her world is a cold, numb woman who has nothing to offer in the way of companionship.

However, the loss of Florens truly reduces Lina to a shadow of who she really is. Once it was decided that Florens would be the one to go fetch the blacksmith, Lina already knew she had lost the one person she loved more than anyone else, "Yet, what about Florens? Look what she did when things changed abruptly: chose to go her own route once the others had crept away. Correctly.

Bravely. But could she manage? Alone? [...]. But will she return, with him, after him, without him, or not at all?" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 66). The Florens who left, although immovable when it came to the blacksmith, was a sweet girl who listened and depended on Lina. The Florens who returns is a woman who has just had her heart and world destroyed and does not have space for anyone else in her life, at the moment.

Contrary to what Updike claims in his review of the novel, that is that "Lina remains a stoic source of domestic order and nurturing substitute mother to Florens when she is docile, before love turns her feral" (Updike, *TheNewYorker.com*), Lina knows that she has nothing else to live for. The last impression we have of her is the one offered to us by the two indentured slaves who helped bury Jacob and who started to work for Rebekka; the picture they give of Lina is one of a woman defeated by the world, "Still, Willard said, Lina continued to do her work carefully, calmly but Scully disagreed, said she was simmering. Like green apples trembling in boiling water too long, the skin near to breaking, needing quick removal, cooling before mashed into sauce" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 145).

If Rebekka and Lina represent the worst consequences of making others one's own reason of existence, Sorrow and Florens represent the women capable of standing back up and building themselves back up from zero. As I illustrated in the first part of the thesis, Florens has an almost pathological need to have someone on whom she can depend upon. The rejection she suffered because of her mother's sending her away when she was a little girl, pushed Florens to project her worth onto others, relying on them to define who she is.

The loss of her mother so early has left Florens with a profound void inside of her where her mother should have been present as the one stable point in her life. As much as Lina loves Florens and takes care of her as if she truly was her mother, she cannot offer her the stability she craves; only the blacksmith is capable of that.

Lina tries to warn her not to give herself over to the blacksmith, telling her stories of the wickedness present in men – a lesson she had to learn on her own skin –, telling her stories of children

having to learn how to endure on their own in a world that takes away from them their motherly protection, leaving them stranded, lost.

However, the allure of a man who comes and goes as he pleases from the farm, a man who owns himself and lives by his own rules, is too tempting for a lost girl like Florens. It is too late for Lina to stop her, as Florens has already made her choice, entrusting her life, her essence to the blacksmith. Soon, she learns that her trust in him was misguided. The rejection of the blacksmith, however, unlike the rejection from her mother, is met with violence on Florens' part, "the bitter fruit [...] of the mercy that Jacob Vaark showed her when she was eight years old" (Updike, *TheNewYorker.com*).

As a child, Florens had no way of understanding what was truly happening – "I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 8) – but now, as an adult, she understands perfectly what the blacksmith is saying. His words ring true in her ears, his defining her a slave because of what she herself does and wants, is what she needs to react to. The blacksmith pushes her to own herself, to stop entrusting to others what she is, "Own yourself, woman, and leave us be" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 141), and Florens' reaction to fight him – possibly kill him – is what enables her to take control of her own life for the first time.

When she returns to the farm, the change in her is evident, "Strangest was Florens. The docile creature they knew had turned feral" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 146). She no longer is the woman who needs to constantly rely on others to define herself; for the first time she is in control of herself and thus has the possibility to survive in a world that has proven itself to be unmerciful.

If through Said's categories it seems as though Sorrow is preventing herself from having a future through her willing isolation, severing the connection she has with the other women of the farm, the ones who could help her survive now that Vaark can no longer protect her with his presence, in fact she has merely shifted her focus onto her daughter, and she has proven herself to be better at surviving in the world she lives in. The love Sorrow has for her daughter is what allows her to grow

into herself and find the strength to make it on her own. The context of the novel cannot be ignored as it defines the characters as much as what happens to them does. In the 1600s, at the very beginning of slavery, Lina and Rebekka have failed to strengthen themselves for what is to come.

Sorrow, much like Florens, craves companionship all her life. She has not been ‘sold’ by her mother – in fact, we do not know what happened to her mother – but the death of her entire family leaves her alone and defenseless while still a child. Unlike Florens, who found someone else to take care of her, Sorrow found no such solace. Her need for someone else in her life became so pressing that she reached the point of mentally fabricating a person she called Twin, so as not to remain alone.

Sorrow seems to drift through life with no true purpose – she lets the couple who find her keep her, but she shows absolutely no intention of working in their little farm – but, if one pays attention, she does show signs of life. When Florens is brought to the farm, Sorrow is immediately interested in her, and had it not been for Lina she probably would have found a way to connect with the little girl.

The same can be said about her meeting with the blacksmith. Upon having been saved by him, Sorrow feels a sort of kinship with him, even though she knows that he will never be hers. It is through him that Sorrow starts to realize that there is something more to life than what she has experienced.

The feeling of being whole again that Sorrow cannot find at first because Lina kills her baby, “Sorrow’s birthing came too soon, Lina told her, for the infant to survive, but Mistress delivered a fat boy who cheered everybody up – for six months anyway” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 123), is something she will achieve by giving birth to her daughter with the right help.

Like Florens, in the end Sorrow shows herself to be the one better suited at knowing what needs to be done to survive in the world, “To dismiss Sorrow as the ‘odd one’ ignored her quick and knowing sense of her position” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 152). Both Sorrow and Florens are almost certainly going to face harder and harder lives as they go on living but, because of how they were able to go beyond their initial trial and find their strength in themselves, not in others, they will be able to survive.

The character of Cee in *Home*, who seen through Said's perspective cannot be defined in any way other than tragic, seen from this new perspective of other-centered women, becomes a character full of possibilities for her future. As we know, for much of her life, Cee has to be considered as an extension of her brother Frank. Up until the moment she has to confront the woman she has become, and how she almost lost her life because of her own stupidity, her brother defines Cee. She cannot be considered a character in herself, because Frank has smothered any kind of independence and self-awareness Cee ever had.

Combined with her brother's suffocating presence in her life, keeping her from fully developing on her own, Cee has let herself be put down and defined by her grandmother Lenore's words. Lenore told her again and again how she was just a useless girl, good for nothing destined to be just a waste of space, that Cee grew up actually believing her without question. When Frank leaves for the war, taking away her only somewhat positive influence in life, Cee remains alone for the first time.

Her need to find another source of companionship in life – someone who will help her define herself through their presence – does not come so much from her unsurmountable need to always have someone with her, but from a simple habit. The only company she has ever had was the kind that overwhelmed her, leaving her no space to grow in herself. It is not a surprise that the man she marries is one who ends up deciding what she is supposed to be and do, only to abandon her as soon as it is convenient for him; that is exactly the kind of company Cee is used to having.

After she survives the doctor's experimentations thanks to her brother saving her one last time, Cee finally has the chance to distance herself from Frank's influence and find out who she really is without her brother's constant presence in her life. For the first time, Cee is surrounded by a group of women who do not ignore her, belittle her – like Lenore – or willingly keep the truth from her for fear of upsetting her – like Sarah. The community of women who heals her (an instance that reminds us of one of *Beloved's* final scenes in which the townswomen gather in front of Sethe's house to free her of *Beloved's* ghost, "they saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. [...]. Building voice

upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (Morrison, *Beloved* 308)), each one giving her healing poultices that they themselves created, do not hold back when scolding her for the stupidity of her actions, “They didn’t waste their time or the patient’s with sympathy and they met the tears of the suffering with resigned contempt” (Morrison, *Home* 121). These strong women, learned in the ways of life, give Cee the possibility to correct her skewed notion of what companionship should be like.

Of course, there is resistance on Cee’s part, but the kind of no-nonsense love that these women pour on her, is exactly what she needed. Thanks to them, Cee – who will never be able to have children of her own, thus never experience what is supposed to be the purest form of bond a woman can possibly feel – is finally able to experience a dependence on others founded on equality between the parts, instead of presupposing her own annulment in favor of the other. The women who heal her do not force her to repay them for their services, they help her stand up and give her the tools she needs to make it on her own.

Through Said’s perspective, her relationship with Frank keeps being an inconvenience but in Morrison’s perspective it is not so. Frank notices the change in his sister, “Cee was different. Two months surrounded by country women who loved mean had changed her” (Morrison, *Home* 121), as she is quick to shut him down when he, though with good intentions and only out of habit, tries to tell her what she has to do, “‘Come on, girl. Don’t cry,’ whispered Frank. ‘Why not? I can be miserable if I want to. You don’t need to try and make it go away’” (Morrison, *Home* 131).

Cee does give him her precious quilt when he insists on having it, but hers is not the acquiescence of one considering herself inferior, as much as the acquiescence of a sister who understands her brother’s need for closure even if she does not fully understand the situation she finds herself into. Cee’s gesture is an offer of genuine help, the same way Frank has helped her her whole life. This offer does not stem from Cee’s wanting to take on the position her brother first held, but from her new understanding of what companionship truly is.

Just like the community of women she is a part of defines her as much as she defines it, so her relationship with her brother presupposes them standing on equal grounds, helping one another, instead of having one superior to the other. Jean Wyatt perfectly highlights the change in the relationship between the siblings, as they “are able to create a home together. It is, moreover, a home that holds the promise of all the traditional meanings of home: comfort, nurturing, safety, care; and it is planted in the hearth of a community that is likewise supporting and nurturing” (Wyatt 159).

In *God Help the Child*, Bride and Brooklyn represent polar opposites, especially when one thinks about their ways of relating with other people. Bride, after a childhood spent belittled by her mother and being taught that her skin would only bring her trouble, has understandable problems dealing with other people. The fact that thanks to her mother she has no self-esteem and has been raised to always be wary of people approaching her, means that there is always a certain distance between her and the rest of the world.

In my opinion, the way she tends to focus on the physical appearance of people she meets, is revealing of the problems she has with genuine interactions, “Now those eyes are more like a rabbit’s than a snake’s but the height is the same. A whole lot else has changed. She is as thin as a rope. Size 1 panties; an A-cup bra, if any. And she could sure use some GlamGo. Formalize Wrinkle Softener and Juicy Bronze would give color to the whey color of her skin”, “Her mouth is trembly. It used to be hard, a straight razor sharpened to slice a kid. A little Botox and some Tango-Matte, not glitter, would have softened her lips maybe influenced the jury in her favor except there was no YOU, GIRL back then” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 16). This peculiar way Bride has of approaching others, highlights how she stops at appearances, never trying to see more than what meets the eye in others. This is not something she does only to strangers, as it is also the way she sees herself as merely something that sells on the market, “Her blue-black skin, accentuated by a chic, all-white wardrobe, is the measure of her remarkable beauty” (Muyumba, *TheAtlantic.com*). Wyatt, in her analysis, manages to capture Bride’s issue with appearances stemming from the way Sweetness raised her, “As

a result of her mother's obsessive focus on her skin, Bride equates herself with her appearance" (Wyatt 172).

Bride's relationships lack intimacy and true understanding, because she has no idea how to relate to other people beyond purely aesthetic considerations. Her formative years were severely lacking on the emotional spectrum of education, leading Bride to perceive herself, and others, first from a purely aesthetic point of view. The blue-black skin her mother said would only cause her pain is something that Bride takes and, with a little help, transforms into both a weapon to get what she wants, and an armor to protect herself from others, "Everywhere I went I got double takes but not like the faintly disgusted ones I used to get as a kid. These were adoring looks, stunned but hungry" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 34).

It is not that Bride does not wish to form attachments with others, but she is unprepared for them. Bride's friendship with Brooklyn is the perfect example of how skewed her sense of companionship truly is. Although Brooklyn does show a modicum of friendship toward Bride – she is concerned by the way she is behaving, she helps her when Bride asks her – she is always on the prowl for the chance to sweep Bride's job from under her nose, all the while smiling and reassuring her that she is taking care of everything for her. At no point does Bride realize what kind of person Brooklyn truly is; again and again, Bride keeps repeating to herself what a truly amazing friend Brooklyn is, "I have authority still, although Brooklyn second-guesses me, even overrides a few of my decisions. I don't mind. I'm lucky she has my back" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 34).

Even when it comes to romantic relationships, Bride shows an appalling lack of insight into her partner. Bride, for what it seems to be the first time, puts some effort into a relationship that she seems to think will last, mainly because Booker is not the usual type of man she goes out with – she has dated mainly athletes or wealthy people only interested in her looks. She confides in Booker her deepest secrets, telling him of the way her mother treated her and the way she saw her landlord rape a little boy and Sweetness made her swear never to tell anyone. Even though she is aware of the fact that Booker is not sharing anything back, she pretends that everything is okay – underlining how her

“‘knowing’ of Booker stops at the level of skin” (Wyatt 172) – until the moment he storms off saying only “You not the woman I want” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 12).

The decision to follow him and confront him, for the first time standing up for herself, reveals itself to be the right one. In the middle of the journey to reach the town Booker has retreated to, Bride ends in a car accident that will force her to stay still for six weeks with the little family of three who rescued her and nursed her back to health. It is during her time with them as her body keeps regressing to that of a little girl, that Bride witnesses what a normal family is supposed to look like. The envy she feels because of them is overwhelming, “Bride’s envy watching them was infantile but she couldn’t stop herself” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 91), but it is exactly what she needs to stand up, confront Booker and take the next step in building a family of her own.

After her argument with Booker, and after having helped him save and care for Queen until the day of her death, Bride is finally ready to move on with her life, this time with Booker at her side and a child growing inside of her. The bonds Bride used to create before staying with the family who cured her, bonds based on putting herself down while holding everyone else to standards she never could have met and that truly did not represent those people, are discarded for new bonds that see her as the focal point on which all the others lean on.

The six weeks with the family who rescues her are the time she needs to finally grow into herself and take the next step into her life. After a conversation with Raisin – a little girl practically identical to Bride except for her skin color – Bride puts herself at risk to rescue the little girl, further injuring herself and, for the first time, doing something truly selfless. It is not a coincidence that Bride saves this little girl, and soon after reveals to Booker that she is with child, consolidating her role as a mother and allowing her to experience the purest bond she could wish for in life. As Wyatt states in her book along the same lines, “Rain brings out in Bride new capacities that enable her to begin to move away from the identity of abused child toward the position of maternal protector and nurturer of an abused child” (Wyatt 186). This baby does not simply represent the chance for Bride and Booker to start again, and this time making it, as a couple. It represents the chance for Bride to fix her past

and break out of the cycle of self-hate initiated by Sweetness' mother, who chose to pass as white and rejected her family in her effort to fit into society.

I feel that Bride's letter to Sweetness mentioning only the baby, does not mean that Booker is out of the picture. Instead, I believe that it represented Bride finally putting her past to rest by showing her mother how happy she is about having a child, a happiness Sweetness never showed to her – she even briefly thought about killing a just-born Bride, “I know I went crazy for a minute because once – just for a minute – I held a blanket over her face and pressed” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 5). Because if Sweetness takes a lifetime to understand that what a parent does to his or her children has consequences, Bride has already learned it and does not wish to repeat Sweetness' mistakes.

Brooklyn is Bride's complete opposite in that she has no intention, and indeed no interest, in forming bonds with anyone at all. In his review of the novel, John Pistelli affirms that “the novel's moral trajectory, [...] requires Bride to be humbled and brought to a kind of Tolstoyan zero-point before she can learn to love” (Pistelli *Wordpress.com*), but that is actually something that more accurately describes what Brooklyn would need to do to change. Out of all the characters of the novel, Bride, exactly because she has witnessed first-hand what the ‘wrong’ kind of love can do to children, is the one who knows more about it than anyone else. Self-absorbed Brooklyn is the one who needs to be humbled to finally understand what love means, but there is no such willingness in her. A victim of sexual abuse as a child, Brooklyn has learned early on to shut herself off from everyone.

Already in the first part of the thesis, I had remarked how Brooklyn seems to be exactly the kind of woman Sweetness was hoping to raise Bride to be. She is completely self-absorbed, incapable of empathy even toward someone she does consider a friend.

At the beginning of the novel, Bride too displays a similar attitude toward the people around her, but her encounter with Raisin pushes her to change as, “For the first time, Bride begins to image what a mother would feel and do. Up until now, Bride as being so focused on her own sufferings and successes that she has been incapable of empathy. But the extreme of maternal rejection recounted by Rain cuts through Bride's habitual self-absorption. She experiences fellow feeling for another's

suffering” (Wyatt 185). This is not something that ever happens to Brooklyn in the course of the story. Being abused by her uncle has completely compromised her ability to form honest and meaningful relationship with others.

From early on in life, Brooklyn has had to learn how to survive on her own and how to never let a chance pass her by, no matter what, “I ran away, too, Bride, but I was fourteen and there was nobody but me to take care of me so I invented myself, toughened myself” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 140). Her relationships with men are limited to sexual encounters and nothing more, her friendship with Bride being probably the most normal bond she has with anyone. Even that, though, is not enough to keep her from working against Bride. This is because, unlike Bride who wants to form bonds with others and needs the presence of other people to define herself, Brooklyn is completely focused on herself.

I do believe that, even if she wanted to, Brooklyn would still not be able to put herself in a position of vulnerability in front of others, as she has been wounded deeply. The only thing Brooklyn does care about is her career; her one means to always be safe and to never have to go back to who she was before. To put someone else in front of her own ambition is simply unconceivable to Brooklyn; that is why she cannot understand what Bride is trying to do by going after Booker, and why, in the end, she has no qualms stealing Bride’s job. In a way, Brooklyn is exactly the kind of person that Sweetness was trying to raise Bride into.

Brooklyn has no care for what others think of her and has made her appearance – a white woman with long blond dreadlocks (even that a contrast to Bride’s dark skin and silky hair) – into an asset to get what she normally would not. Her emotional detachment, almost numbness, makes her someone hard to read, another contrast with the way she seems more than capable of reading other people. In a matter of seconds, Brooklyn understands that Bride hides something from her, “She’s lying” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 23), and her keen attention to the people around her is what allows her to take advantage of any favorable situation. Still, no matter how keen she is at

understanding others, her sole focus is, and in all probability will always remain so, only and exclusively herself.

## Chapter 2.2

The notion of past-orientation easily discernible in Said's studies on late style, while certainly present, in some ways, even in Toni Morrison's novels – as I have demonstrated in Chapter 1 of this thesis –, takes on a completely different tone and meaning when we choose to distance ourselves and focus exclusively on what Morrison wishes to communicate to us, and what is hidden in her characters.

It is true that the past is still very much present in each of these four novels, and each character does go back to the traumatic event of their past that has ended up shaping them, but this does not mean that each character is incapable of moving on from their past. This way of seeing things is evident when Toni Morrison speaks of Heed and Christine's decision to move on from Bill Cosey, in an interview with Charlie Rose,

[...] Mr. Cosey who, by the way, is just a guy. I mean, the women and maybe society and certainly maybe even himself, have given him all these incredible roles: the ultimate friend, the perfect husband [...]. But the last chapter, and he did, you know, meddle a lot in their life, is called 'Phantom' because they *have* (emphasis added by me) to get rid of him. I mean, they allowed themselves, a lot of them, to be seduced by, ruined by, controlled by, Bill Cosey. [...]. Just the idea, the image, the control in the mind, not just the physical life, of what your life is: well 'he, he, he, he and therefore this'. Once they gave it up... (Manufacturing Intellect, *youtube.com* 00:13:37-00:14:43).

If the men, both authors and characters, analyzed by Said, find it impossible to leave the past, it is because they look back at what has been and feel melancholic, despairing because their end is getting near, and because their physical and mental health keeps them from ever being able to repeat past experiences as they get closer to death.

On the contrary, as is evident in my analysis in Chapter 1.1, in Toni Morrison's last four novels we do not feel this sense of melancholy for what life was like in the past, mostly because these character's past is punctuated by traumatic events that still trouble them. No, what Toni Morrison seems to want to communicate through these stories, is the simple notion that the past is the past, what happened to us cannot be changed or erased, and while the past does shape who we become, it does not dictate what we will do for the rest of our lives. Each of Morrison's characters, from Heed to Bride, is the product of the trauma they lived in the past, but what these characters choose to do is solely in function of their future, while standing firmly grounded in their present.

These characters are all very much aware of their pasts, of the way it controls them without them even realizing it at first, but still, as soon as they finally recognize how they are letting past events control them, they do fight back against them to build a future for themselves with their own strength.

It is not so much realizing the power they are giving their past by letting what happened control them that makes them decide to consciously do something to change. It is the harsh confrontation with the person they are in the present that convinces them of the need to change, it is "in the kind of womanhood or manhood ready to face down blue devils and reckless lovers, pedophilic fathers and murderous mothers, Morrison locates the kind of sensibility that frees many of her characters from the chokehold their histories have on them" (Muyumba, *TheAtlantic.com*).

The two main protagonists of *Love*, Heed and Christine, are probably the two characters with the most pressing past still very much present in the form of Junior – the girl who acts as a medium between Bill Cosey and the rest of his family. Heed's need to carve a space for herself in Cosey's family after being sold by her father like cattle, is one of the main reasons that pushes her to fight tooth and nail against the woman she used to consider her best friend.

It cannot be denied that Heed often loses herself in the past, and that the way she thinks about Bill Cosey – whom she refers to as 'Papa', "Only Papa knew better, had picked her out of all he could have chosen" (Morrison, *Love* 72) – does sometimes appear to be tinged by melancholy mixed with

veiled pride. Still, one only needs to pay attention to the evolution of the story to realize that there is no desire in Heed to go back to the way things were when Bill was still alive.

The more one reads about Heed's story, the more one realizes that her sole focus is on Christine, not Cosey. Although there is a vague sense of gratitude in her because of the way Cosey took her away from a life of poverty with a family that regarded her as a tool to get money, Heed is more than aware of the fact that what Bill Cosey did to her is simply monstrous.

Heed, for all her tendency to lose herself in the past, is firmly grounded in the present and in the one person who is a constant in her life, Christine. When we consider her story in this perspective, especially knowing the love that united her to Christine as a child, then her desire to be recognized as a Cosey by the law, takes on a completely different meaning. What Heed wants is not something that will tie her forever to Bill Cosey, but the chance to be recognized by Christine as family, a bond that will never be broken. As Heed herself will explain to Christine in their moment of mutual confessions right before dying, what she wanted more than anything was to stay with Christine for the rest of their lives, "I wanted to be with you. Married to him, I thought I would be. I wanted to go on your honeymoon. Wish you had" (Morrison, *Love* 193). In her child mind, marrying Cosey – Christine's grandfather – would mean getting to stay with Christine indefinitely as part of her family.

Getting recognized as the "Cosey child" (Morrison, *Love* 88), in Bill's final will, would allow Heed to gain full control of the hotel so that no one would be able to take it from her, while also, simultaneously, safeguarding her future and giving to Christine what she has always wanted, a place where she belongs.

Christine, much like Heed, is always reminiscing about everything that happened in her life, in some cases almost regretting the end of a particularly happy moment, but she too does not want to go back to a life on the road, always moving, never able to go back home, wherever that is. The motive behind her drive to get the full property of the hotel does certainly stem from her desperate need to know that she does have a place to go home to, a place that is only hers and that no one, not her grandfather, not her mother, not even Heed, can take away from her. But this need to own Cosey's

hotel hides Christine's need to know that when her worst nightmare becomes a reality – that is, when Heed will grow tired of her and will throw her out in the streets – at least she will have a place where to retreat,

“She is! That’s been her whole life, don’t you get it? Replacing me, getting rid of me. I’m always last; all the time the one being told to go, get out.” “Christine, please.” “This is *my* place. I had my sixteenth-birthday party in that house. When I was away at school it was my *address*. It’s where I belong and nobody is going to wave some liquor-splashed menu at me and put me out of it!” “But you were away from the property for years...” “Fuck you! If you don’t know the difference between property and a home you need to be kicked in the face, you stupid, you dumb, you cannery trash!” (Morrison, *Love* 95).

Much more than that, in my opinion, is Christine's desire to find a way to remain in Heed's life. If she gained control of the house, then it would not matter whether Heed is tired of her or not, for she would remain a part of her life indefinitely. For this reason, Christine has no time to worry over the past as her most pressing issue is in the present. Furthermore, exactly like Heed, her goal stretches well into the future, as she too wants a way that will allow her to remain with Heed for the rest of their lives.

Although both of these characters seem intent on causing the destruction one of the other, their true motive is exactly the opposite. Both of them know how damaging one's family can truly be and how, sometimes, the family of your choice is the only one that really matters. May betrayed Christine by agreeing to send her away and by keeping her as far away from home as possible, while going home was the one thing Christine wanted.

Heed's family betrayed her by using her as a way to gain access to Cosey's fortune not only making her feel abandoned, but also making her the target of all the people who held her responsible for her marriage to Cosey, and who did not hold back when picking on her behind her back,

How could he marry her? Protection. From what? Other women. I don't think so. Does he play around? Probably. Are you crazy, sure he does. She's not bad-looking. Good figure. Way past good; she could be in the Cotton Club. Except for her color. And she'd have to smile some of the time. Needs to do something with her hair. Tell me about it. So, why, why'd he pick her? Beats me. She's hard to be around. Hard how? I don't know; she's sort of physical. (Long laughter.) Meaning? You know, jungle-y. (Choking laughter.)" (Morrison, *Love* 75).

Heed and Christine's objective in this context is to find a way to make their future something that only they can shape and control, a future where they will finally get to be together, especially since those responsible for their separation – Cosey and May – are dead and incapable of interfering. Concerning Heed and Christine's reunion at the end of the novel, the moment in which the two women at last reach a reconciliation, Wyatt affirms, and I completely agree with this interpretation, "The renewal of their mutually enriching dialogue promises a new beginning. Retrieving the potentials inherent in their childhood love can now generate movement into a creative future" (Wyatt 100). However, she then continues by saying,

But alas, this new birth is out of synchrony with the inexorable passage of chronological time. Heed is not an eleven-year-old child but a woman in her sixties who is about to die from the fall she has just suffered. There *is* no future. What should be a new beginning is truncated to the few minutes before Heed dies: (re)birth and death collapse into each other, obliterating the temporal spread between. It is too late (Wyatt 100).

Although this is a possible way to interpret the finale of the novel, it disregards the presence of supernatural elements that, as often happens with Toni Morrison, are very much present in the story. In a novel with the phantom of a dead old man communicating with young girls, another ghost of a dead old woman acting as silent keeper of past events, and the otherwise impossible intertwining of minds that leads to reconciliation, Wyatt's bleak interpretation cannot be held as absolutely true.

For this reason, we must pay heed to what happens after the two women open up one to the other, just as we cannot ignore L's claim that she can see Heed and Christine walking together along the beach, finally at peace. Even though death claims Heed, the two friends do manage to stay together as their moment of complete honesty has, at last, united them again, thereby making their future together a reality.

Junior is perhaps the character whose future-orientation is clearer than everyone else's. Apart from little clues as to her past that we find here and there, her story is given to us all in one chapter dedicated to her. This reveal, so simple and straightforward in its delivery, serves the sole purpose of contextualizing Junior's actions up until that moment and the motivation which pushes her to the extremes she is willing to go.

If an analysis through Said's categories leads us to believe that Junior's actions are what preclude her from ever having the possibility of making her dream of taking the house for herself a reality, everything changes if we read her story while keeping in mind what her true aim was from the very beginning. Junior has shown herself to be different since her time at school in the Settlement. While the other kids simply went there and never truly learned anything, Junior had in her a genuine thirst for knowledge,

Bored at last with the dogs and her mother, faster and slyer than her brothers, afraid of her uncles and unamused by their wives, Junior welcomed District Ten, first to get away from the Settlement, then for itself. She was the first Rural to speak up and make a stab at homework. The girls in her class avoided her and the few who tried to sprinkle the seeds of friendship were quickly forced to choose between the untidy Rural with one dress and the crafty vengeance little girls know how to exact. Junior lost every time, but behaved as though the rejection was her victory, smiling when she saw the one-recess friend retreat to her original fold" (Morrison, *Love* 56).

She could have thrived in school, maybe even to the point of being able to make something of herself unlike her peers. What stops her from doing that is the fact that she belongs to the Settlement and no one, not her schoolmates nor her family, would let her forget that.

Her friendship with the one boy who did not care for the fact that she was a Settlement girl, is lost to her because of who she is, because her family wants her to behave like one of them,

Something belonging to the Settlement was being transferred to the site of a failure so dismal it had not registered on them as failure at all – but as the triumph of natural light over the institutional darkness. [...]. They didn't know themselves why they set fire to a car seat rather than remove it. Or why a snake was important to them. They wanted the cotton-mouth returned to its rightful home (Morrison, *Love* 57)

After fleeing from that place, her life seems to get marginally better at Correctional, but even then, she is reminded of who she truly is. From that moment on, her objective is to prove to herself and to all others that she is not a Settlement girl, she is much more than that; she is smart, resourceful, capable of dealing with life and adapting to the circumstances presented to her.

The fact that she is Bill Cosey's spirit's medium in this life, does tie her to the Coseys' past and it is what gives her the chance to claim Monarch Street for herself, but all of that covers what is the true dream she has within her; elevating herself above the Settlement, leaving that life behind her. This is the only way she has to finally break the bond she has with her place of birth, a bond that does not allow her to be herself.

In the end, even if not in the way she expected, Junior does obtain what she wanted. The relationship with Romen, which started as a way to pass the time and please Cosey's spirit, reveals itself to be exactly what Junior needed to truly take the distance from her place of birth which keeps defining her against her will. Right when her plan is about to be a success, destabilized by Cosey's disappearance without a warning, Junior ends up confessing to Romen what she has done. What truly pushed her to a confession, however, is what Romen has done before she allowed him to take her to

Heed's bed, right under Cosey's portrait. While taking a bath together, Romen had lifted her ruined foot, the only tangible proof on her body that she belongs to the Settlement, and kissed it. What makes Romen's gesture so powerful not only for Junior, but for us readers too, is that, as Toni Morrison herself explained in an interview with Charlie Rose when talking about the scene in which Romen refuses to rape a girl as his 'friends' want him to, this love is born out of a natural instinct within Romen,

I had to put it context, that kind of instinctive, caring love this kid had, to save somebody in a situation where his peers are pressuring him to do a bad thing, and he doesn't even know he's doing it and he is now ostracized because loving, or caring, is weakness. And he knows it. And he is ashamed of that very human, very lovely instinct to care for something that's wounded. So that's one kind of love (Manufacturing Intellect, [youtube.com, 00:12:55-00:13:32](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00:12:55-00:13:32)).

It is the acceptance and the acknowledgement of who she is as a whole that makes her falter and confess her plan, dooming it to failure. This does not mean however, that she no longer has a future. When Christine comes back home, and converses with Heed – who is now a part of her – it seems both of them are willing to give her – a girl so much like the both of them – a chance to start a new life. Even after everything that has happened, Junior's story ends full of possibilities and reaching out to a future where she is no longer bound to her past.

This future-orientation is present even in *A Mercy*, the only novel set in the remote past, and in such a period in American history, as to make it seem the novel least concerned with the future among the latest works published by Toni Morrison.

Yet even the characters of this novel, despite the seemingly hopeless future that awaits them – and maybe exactly because of this – are all projected into their future. I would like, this time, to start with the character that most falls into this category, Sorrow.

When I analyzed her and her story through Said's characterization, I could not but be lead to conclude that her single-minded focus on her newborn daughter, coupled with her willing self-isolation, doomed her and her daughter to a repetition of what happened to Florens and her own mother.

Furthermore, Sorrow's lack of attention to what is happening to anyone and anything else, made her unable to see the signs of what is likely about to happen in the farm; Rebekka having to sell some of her slaves – something she tries to do with Florens to survive, “When she beat Sorrow, had Lina's hammock taken down, advertised the sale of Florens, he cringed inside but said nothing” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 155).

While this analysis remains correct if we think of Sorrow's end of the story through a third party observer – and I need to point out that the one who tells what happens to Sorrow is a male indentured slave, unlikely to ever see freedom (Said's exact candidate when speaking of late style) – things change if we pay attention to what Sorrow herself reveals of her current state of mind.

For the vast part of the novel, Sorrow appears distant in every sense of the word: Lina has ostracized her and she is emotionally numb from the shipwreck that killed her family. We do not know how Sorrow was before the shipwreck, before ‘Sorrow’ became her name, but we have to assume that her lack of care for anything that happens around her, much like Twin's appearance in her mind, is a direct consequence of the shipwreck. This attitude of just suffering whatever life throws at her with barely a reaction, accompanies her even when she lives at the farm.

The first moment of awakening from her numbness, is when Lina takes away her newborn baby and drowns it, “Although Sorrow though she saw her own newborn yawn, Lina wrapped it in a piece of sacking and set it a-sail in the widest part of the stream and far below the beavers' dam” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 123). Having witnessed her baby's yawn, Sorrow is finally jolted out of her stupor, that yawn seared into her brain, cautioning her for the next time something like this might happen.

She is definitively brought back to life by the birth of her second baby, a daughter that she brings into the world alone save for two men, having fled the farm, wiser in her decision not to trust Lina. The clarifying elation for this birth is there when we read of it through Sorrow's point of view – "The infant safely born, Sorrow, long addled in the head by her shipboard traumas and her illusion of an advisor companion called Twin, regains focus" (Updike, *TheNewYorker.com*); her love, her pride for what she has accomplished shining through as she holds her baby in her arms, "Twin's absence was hardly noticed as she concentrated on her daughter. Instantly, she knew what to name her. Knew also what to name herself" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 133).

What possesses her is not a love that blinds her to the dangers around her, as we are led to believe if we read the scene as Said would compel us to, it is a love that empowers her, that gives her the sense of being capable of doing anything. Her isolation at the end is not her ignoring what is happening around her, but her being conscious of the fact that she can take whatever life throws her way with her daughter. Sorrow, after everything she has been through, is ready to move forward into the future with a new security and a new understanding of herself and others.

Florens, in this respect, is extremely similar to her. She does not wander through life, emotionally numb, barely reacting to anything that happens around her. But she does take on a submissive role as she lives at the farm, letting Lina guide her and relying on her and on the kindness the Vaarks grace her with. Even when she starts a relationship with the blacksmith, her devotion, so clearly not answered in kind by him, puts her in a position of subservience.

Florens' greatest fear is, yes, of being rejected by the one she loves in favor of someone else, but I reckon that what she also fear is having to take control of her life after having been abandoned by the woman who was supposed to teach her everything she would need to survive on her own.

There are clues in the text that make it seem as though Florens herself is aware of this subtle fear of hers. We know from Lina that her favorite story is the one with the eagle and her hatchlings. Much like Florens and all the other main characters of the story, the hatchlings remain without a mother, alone in a world that will make it hard for them to survive. At the end of the story, Florens

asks “Do they live?” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 63), to which Lina’s answer is a simple, lapidary “We have” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 63).

Her journey to the blacksmith, that she considers her sole purpose, exposes her to the reality outside the farm, driving home the dangers that lurk at every corner for someone like her. When she is allowed to stay with a mother and her daughter for the night, she ends up involved in the ordeal this little family has to go through. The little girl living with her mother is accused of being a demon, yet when the highest authority figures come to the house to inspect the girl, the one who ends up scrutinized is Florens.

The humiliation of being inspected like cattle stays with Florens,

They point me to a door that opens onto a storeroom and there, standing among carriage boxes and a spinning wheel, they tell me to take off my clothes. Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They frown at the candle burn on my palm, the one you kissed to cool. They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 113)

Even though she manages to escape thanks to the little girl, it is even more clear to her that she needs a way to survive and, at the moment, that that way is her love for the blacksmith.

Up until the moment of her confrontation with him, Florens has, yes, being steadily present-centered – pushed by her past, of course, but always aware of her situation and her necessity to deal with it – but limited in her future-observation in that she only projected herself as far as her necessity to stay with the blacksmith to survive.

After her confrontation with him, after she assaults him because he is leaving her and, in my opinion, because of what he said to her, “You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind. You shout the word – mind, mind, mind – over and over and then you laugh, saying as I live and

breathe, a slave by choice” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 141), implying that she is a slave to life itself, incapable of doing anything on her own, Florens is finally put in a position where she has to find a way to live for herself.

Her decision to write down her story inside Jacob’s abandoned mansion is not futile, as it appeared to be when I analyzed Florens’ final attempt at reaching the blacksmith and all who would read her story. Although no one will probably read what she wrote, by writing what has happened to her, Florens is purging herself of her past as a woman who needed to lean on others to live, and setting for herself a starting line from which her new life will commence. From what Scully and Willard tell us the moment they see her reappear, Florens has become a completely different woman, someone hardened by life. Florens might never find complete resolution with her past – that could only be achievable through a confrontation with her mother – but she is now capable of moving forward toward her future, as well equipped to deal with it as she can be.

Although their attempts end up in failure, even Rebekka and Lina, in a limited way, present some elements of future-orientation. What causes problems within their plans and ends up resulting in a complete defeat that leaves both women in a state which reminds us of the way Sorrow was at the beginning of her story, is the way they tried to face their future.

As we know, Rebekka’s hope was to have a family of her own that, yes, would give her love, but that would also continue her family in the future, taking care of the farm, as Jacob wanted, and building upon what she and Jacob would have left them. When that hopes for the future becomes an impossibility, she turns to her husband because even if they have lost all their children, the two of them would be enough for each other. Unfortunately for her, Jacob ends up consumed by his own ambition and ends up dying for a dream that he should never have tried to concretize.

At this point, sick and tormented by hallucinations of ruined women with whom she now has too much in common, Rebekka ends up closing in on herself, abandoning any hope she might have still had, and resigning herself to merely surviving for as long as she can.

Meanwhile, Lina goes down a scarily similar path. The last of her people, forced to live by strangers' rules and abused and sold by her 'savior', Lina focuses all her hopes for the future – not only hers, but her people's too in a way – onto Florens, a little girl unable to take care of herself, much less bear the burden of the knowledge Lina wants to entrust to her.

For all her attempts to keep Florens all to herself, "Lina was simply wary of anyone who came between herself and Florens" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 131), Lina fails to realize how deep Florens' fear of abandonment and need for stability really run. Only when Florens runs away to go to the blacksmith, does Lina realize the mistake she has made.

When Florens comes back, she is already out of her reach and that, coupled with the loss of her friendship with Rebekka and the rapidly changing and decaying world of the farm, leaves Lina a husk of who she really was. The mistake committed by both Lina and Rebekka, is that they both entrust their hopes for the future to other people instead of themselves. In a rapidly changing world as the one they live in, what they do amounts to tempting the fate having no way to deal with the consequences.

Along the lines of Sorrow and Florens' way of moving toward their future, yet slightly different in her approach, is Cee's story. All her life Cee has been in a submissive position where her brother Frank protected her from everything that could harm her, and decided her life for her. We never hear Cee's voice as a child living hidden in her brother's shadow, almost as if she did not exist. The first time we read a chapter from Cee's point of view, she is already an adult, living on her own in extremely poor conditions.

Much like Florens, Cee never had to take care of herself, never had to take decisions for herself because Frank took that fundamental responsibility from her. That is the reason why she lets Principal – also known as Prince – rule over her life without even realizing what kind of person he truly is,

There was no job in or around Lotus that Prince allowed himself to take so he took her to Atlanta. Cee looked forward to a shiny life in the city where – after a few weeks of ogling

water coming from the turn of a spigot, inside toilets free of flies, streetlights shining longer than the sun and as lovely as fireflies women in high heels and gorgeous hats trotting to church two, sometimes three times a day, and following the grateful joy and dumbfounded delight of the pretty dress Prince bought her – she learned that Prince had married her for an automobile. (Morrison, *Home* 49).

Cee needs someone who will take away from her the responsibility of having to make a choice regarding her future, partly because her brother never lets her experiment with her choices, partly because she herself does not think she is smart enough to do the right thing – this all because of Lenore’s continuous verbal abuse.

The choices she makes, get her abandoned by the man she believed to be a responsible and loving one, and then put her in the house where the white doctor – defined by Ron Charles as a “modern-day version of that insidious schoolteacher in *Beloved*”, a reminder of African-American historically horrible relation to the science that justified their abuse from slavery to Tuskegee” (Charles, *whashingtonpost.com*) –, uses her, and other poor blacks, to experiment new drugs and, in all probability, methods to sterilize black women – this last detail exposing, as Wyatt underlines in her book, a particular bleak chapter in U.S. history where, “Americans like to associate eugenics with Nazi Germany and thus forget that eugenics flourished in the United States for the first four decades of the twentieth century, long before it became influential in Germany” (Wyatt 157). The consequences of such decisions lead to her ‘death’, one that would have been caused, indirectly, by Frank and Lenore too. Waking up, thanks to the relentless cures bestowed upon her by the community of women living in Lotus, Cee is still reluctant to let herself be as vulnerable as the townswomen want her to be,

So Cee, bristling with embarrassment, lay propped on pillows at the edge of Ethel’s tiny back porch soon as the sun’s violent rays angled in that direction. Each time anger and humiliation curled her toes and stiffened her legs. “Please, Miss Ethel. I can’t do this no more.” “Oh, be quiet girl.” Ethel was losing patience. “So far as I can tell every other time

you opened your legs you was tricked. You think sunlight going to betray you too?  
(Morrison, *Home* 124).

Once her body has been healed, Cee is finally ready for her future. She knows what she can do, she knows how strong she is and how she can accomplish anything in life as long as she stays true to herself. Not only does Cee take back control over her life, she takes back control over her emotions too.

Throughout her childhood, Cee had to keep herself and her emotions hidden, from Lenore because letting her know how much her words hurt would only have encouraged her in her abuse, from Frank not to let him worry and, in my opinion, to avoid having him come to her and take on himself even her pain.

As we see toward the end of the novel, as soon as Cee allows herself to feel all the pain stemming from what she has been through, all the possibilities she has lost because of her now barren womb, Frank's instinctive reaction is to try and take that pain away from her.

If the Cee Frank knew before had still been there, she probably would have allowed him to brush her pain aside. This new Cee, a woman who finally knows her worth, takes a hold of her pain, feels it in all its strength, demands it to be acknowledged and felt. This Cee knows herself and knows that she has to take control of her own life, instead of letting others, even her beloved brother, control her. She has at her disposal all the tools she might need to build herself a comfortable future, and if her body is no longer able to bear children, thus of projecting her into the future through them, she is still more than capable of making it in life.

The one character no one doubts to be future-oriented to the point of being pathologically obsessed with it is Lily. There is only one chapter written from her point of view, yet it is an incredibly interesting one. Lily's story lasts a brief period of time; we do not know anything of her childhood, and very little about her present. We only know that she had to change jobs and that, when she went to an estate agency to buy her very first house, she was turned away on the count of her skin color,

When she described her purpose and the couple of houses on sale she had found, the agent smiled and said, "I'm really sorry." "They're sold already?" asked Lily. The agent dropped her eyes, then decided not to lie. "Well, no, but there are restrictions." "On what?" The agent sighed. Obviously not wanting to have this conversation, she lifted her desk blotter and pulled out some stapled papers. Turning a page, she showed Lily an underlined passage. Lily traced the lines of print with her forefinger [...]. "I've got rentals and apartments in other parts of the city. Would you like..." "Thank you," said Lily. (Morrison, *Home* 73)

Already in the first few pages, we can ascertain how Lily is an extremely driven woman, clear on what she wants, and more than ready to do whatever she has to do to reach her goal. Even though the rejection of her request hurts her deeply, leaving her humiliated like never before in her life, Lily does not let her emotions get the best of her. She collects herself and moves on with her life but she never abandons her dream, instead preparing herself for what she has to do to get to the point where she will be able to make her dreams a reality.

Her relationship with Frank may seem counterproductive to such dream, but the reality of the situation is that Lily knows she will need help if she wants to reach her objective. She does not give an explanation as to why she felt Frank was a suitable companion to have in life, "They slid into each other, becoming a couple of sorts within a week" (Toni Morrison, *Home* 75), but perhaps she believed him to be someone as lost as her in life, waiting for the chance to prove himself.

If that is the case, then Lily was sorely mistaken. As she soon learns, Frank is not just a man looking for purpose, he is instead afflicted by a serious disability that Lily does not know how to deal with. In fact, she does not even want to deal with Frank's problems, as they are nothing more than another obstacle for her to overcome along the way. Lily fails to realize that the home she is looking for, for Frank is nothing but "a hard-faced, indifferent land, in which he must heal his own scars" (Akbar, *independent.com*), abandoned by the army happy to use his body, only to discard him once back in the United States.

As she herself states, she is bothered by Frank's total disinterest in anything that could better their life. Their relationship had been comfortable up to a certain point, "Living with Frank had been glorious at first. Its breakdown was more of a stutter than a single eruption. She had begun to feel annoyance rather than alarm when she came home from work and saw him sitting on the sofa staring at the floor" (Morrison, *Home* 75), but the reality is that the two of them have nothing in common, and are in completely different states of mind. Where Lily is totally focused on her future to the point of neglecting everything else, Frank barely hangs onto the present, frequently letting himself be swallowed by a past he cannot possibly move on from.

For these reasons, the end of their relationship was already there at the beginning, and fitting is the way this relationship comes to an end on Lily's part. She leaves behind a problematic man that would not have been useful to her dream, and in his place she has no money – important to remark how Frank's last name is indeed 'Money' – that can help her in taking one step closer to her future.

We do not know what will happen to Lily, yet her focus on what has to be done and her unyielding determination, lead us to believe that, sooner or later, she will manage to make her dream a reality.

On the topic of future-orientation, I believe that Bride in *God Help the Child* is probably one of the most interesting characters in all the four books.

Already at the beginning of the book, Bride is ready to dedicate herself to her future. For all her harsh way of behaving, her façade hiding the little girl she still is, Bride shows immediately that she wants to move on with her life, and she already knows where to begin; the biggest mistake she ever made in her attempt to make her mother love her more, "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" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 32).

As I have already said, her attempt is childish, reflecting the child she was when she sent Sofia to a prison cell for fifteen years, "I was only eight years old, still little Lula Ann, when I lifted my arm and pointed my finger at her" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 30). But the simple fact that she

takes that first step to try and fix her mistake, puts her on the right path. But why does that first attempt not lead her toward her future? Why does she still feel out of sorts even after doing what she thought was right? What makes her fail is the fact that what Bride is dealing with is not the root of all her problems.

Sending Sofia to jail is certainly one of the biggest burdens she has, and she is right in wanting to make amends to the woman, but the true problem she needs to solve is far more deeply entrenched within her. This problem will actually manifest itself physically on her own body once Booker leaves her after an argument. As he leaves her apartment, Booker affirms “You not the woman” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 12), and soon after Bride starts noticing unsettling changes taking place in her,

It was when I got dressed for the drive I noticed the first peculiar thing. Every bit of my pubic hair was gone. Not gone as in shaved or waxed, but gone as in erased, as in never having been there in the first place. It scared me, so I threaded through the hair on my head to see if it was shedding, but it was as thick and slippery as it had always been. Allergy? Skin disease, maybe? It worried me but there was no time to do more than be anxious and plan to see a dermatologist. I had to be on my way to make it on time (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 12-13).

With the passing of time, Bride’s body keeps losing the marks of a fully developed woman: first, the hair on her body, then the closing of the holes in her ears, then her breasts. For a woman like her, who makes of her appearance the focal point of her self-definition, who, as John Freeman writes in his review of the novel, “doesn’t merely thrust her blackness back to viewers, she makes of it a protective mask” (Freeman, *TheAustralian.com.au*), this sudden regression to a prepubescent body acts as a veritable trauma she does not immediately understand.

At first, Bride believes that what is happening to her is a medical condition that she needs to have looked at, but when she has to stop in the middle of nowhere, welcomed by a little family that takes care of her while she recovers from the accident she had while looking for Booker, Bride finds

herself face to face with a little white girl with a troubled past, who reminds her too much of the scared little black girl she used to be. It is that encounter that helps her realize that the changes in her body are, slowly but surely, taking her back to the body of the little girl she never ceased to be,

“I guess. I don’t really know. She never said and I doubt she really knows. Her baby teeth were gone when we took her. And so far she has never had a period and her chest is flat as a skateboard.” Bride shot up. Just the mention of a flat chest yanked her back to her problem. Had her ankle not prohibited it, she would have run, rocketed away from the scary suspicion that she was changing back into a little black girl (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 97).

From there comes what is the right decision that will allow her to finally put her past to rest and move on; standing up for herself in front of the man who put her down with his words.

When she finally does it, screaming and hurling things at Booker who dared to tell her “You not the woman” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 12), while he did not even have the courage to be himself, her body finally goes back to normal, granting her the chance to have a baby of her own, one to cherish instead of hurting it like Sweetness did to her.

Although through Said’s perspective, Bride does not find peace in that she never confronted her mother, I believe that the letter Bride sent her was more than enough. She communicated to her mother that her life is moving on and that she can look at her future knowing that Sweetness has no more power over her.

## Chapter 2.3

One of the easiest themes to individuate among the ones proposed by Said in his categorization of late style, is that of a general sense of pessimism that permeates both the author and the characters in his works. I mentioned in Chapter 1.4 how an author who reaches the end of his career, and probably his life, might not be willing to accept the fact that he is no longer able to produce works of the caliber he used to in his younger years – whether because of decaying mental or physical health, or because he has simply exhausted his creativity.

The desire to show everyone – and himself, most importantly – that he is still capable of doing his job, may lead the author to try and keep on creating, even to the point of wanting to go beyond the current cultural trends. As we have seen, this desire to go beyond leads, more often than not, to frustration at one's inability to actually do so. Out of these frustrated desires that cannot be turned into reality, is born a pessimism that bleeds into the author's works whether they intended to or not. Lampedusa is an example that comes immediately to mind, Genet with his betrayed causes and death separating mothers and children, Mozart with his troubled love life – “The score that he finally did produce bears the marks, I believe, of other aspects of his life in 1789. One (referred to by Steptoe) is his wife Constance's absence for a rest cure in Baden while he worked on the opera. While there she ‘displayed improprieties’ that prompted a letter from Mozart” (Said 60) – reflected in the trial of love in *Così Fan Tutte*, Glenn Gould with his premature retirement to a private life far from the spotlight, caused by his frustration with the contemporary world of musicians.

Pessimism in the face of an impossible to change or delay end, is unavoidable if one has nothing beside himself to help in defining oneself. Face to face with an inevitable end, conscious of the impossibility of going back to happier and more productive times, pessimism cannot but be the only possible response for men used to being fully in control of their life and work.

This pessimism cannot be found in Toni Morrison's late novels, not even in her most bleak novels. Morrison's novels always have in themselves themes of death, betrayals, humiliations, and righteous fury toward a country that keeps African-Americans under its foot, twisting their affective dynamics and forcing them to live with the wrathful ghosts of their people, making us recall Baby Suggs words "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (Morrison, *Beloved* 6).

And yet, what Toni Morrison manages to convey, despite the troubled history of the African-American community, is a sense of hope for the future, of endless optimism that things can and will change; when asked if her characters were winners or losers, her answer was instantaneous, "'Always winners' 'Always winners?' 'Always. Even if they drop dead' 'They're winners?' 'They're winners'" (Manufacturing Intellect, *youtube.com*, 00:14:46-00:14:51). . In an interview with Charlie Rose, Morrison explained how each of her characters always learns something in her stories,

They learn something very, very important. Some critical thing they learn that they never would have learned except for the novel. Their experiences are epiphanies. I think those are happy endings, when you finally figure it out, and you know it. Well, maybe they don't have a car or maybe they don't have their loved one or whatever, but this is the life of the mind and the spirit, and they win. They're not stupid anymore!" (Manufacturing Intellect, *youtube.com* 00:14:54-00:15:24),

allowing each one of them to move forward with their lives. Though that was her intention, what emerges from her novels is a clear representation of the problems still present in American society, especially concerning the African-American community, while she encourages us to learn something from the past and move onto brighter futures.

In the four latest novels she published, all her characters are plagued by troubled pasts, ranging from daughters abandoned by their mothers to being abused by them, both physically and mentally. All these women keep on living their lives through the traumas they experienced in the past and while

they are undoubtedly still affected by what happened to them in the past, there is in them a determination to change that has to be taken into account.

The more we read of these characters, the more we see how their actions are influenced by a past that keeps clinging onto them, whether they want to or not, whether they are aware of it or not. They struggle against their past and their fight against behavior conditioned by what they have been through and by the memory of the pain – emotional or physical – they felt is a hard one.

Still, they persevere in their journey not only to free themselves from the influence of past events that can no longer hurt them, but also to build themselves a better life that they will be in control of this time. A life that will not be marred by the same mistakes of the past.

An example of this unwavering optimism is of course represented by the tumultuous relationship between Heed and Christine. The two women start as best friends, bound together by the purest love one could ever find in life, the innocent love two little girls feel for one another as they share adventures and findings growing up surrounded by adults who will never be able to fully understand them,

It's like that when children fall for one another. On the spot, without introduction. Grown-ups don't pay it much attention because they can't imagine anything more majestic to a child than their own selves, and so confuse dependence with reverence. Parents can be lax or strict, timid or confident, it doesn't matter. Whether they are handing out goodies and, scared by tears, say yes to any whim, or whether they spend their days making sure the child is correct and corrected – whatever kind they are, their place is secondary to a child's first chosen love (Morrison, *Love* 199).

It is the depth of this love that makes their separation at the hand of Cosey appear even more tragic than it already is. That May – who is supposed to always be on her daughter's side, protecting her and making sure she grows up in a welcoming environment – is the one who takes advantage of the

rift created between the two girls as she had always wanted to do, adds a wretched twist to an already despicable situation.

The tragedy of these two little girls does not end here, however, as, much like May, Heed's mother drives the rift between her daughter and Christine deeper still, allowing her husband to sell her daughter and not stopping Heed's sisters from using her as a tool to get money.

The brutality to which they are subjected ends up twisting their love but not erasing it, no matter what May wished. Incapable of dealing with the twisted world they are living in, Heed and Christine start the fight between them that will last until Heed's death.

What seems like the cruelty that only children are capable of manifesting – Heed sets Christine's bed on fire, Christine rejoices in Heed's tears when she is spanked by Cosey at the dinner table – is the only way they have to express their feelings for each other. The spiteful arguments, the heated fights, the hateful glares, are all a manifestation of a love that was pure and that May and Bill Cosey, through their treatment of the two girls, have perverted into something almost unrecognizable.

I say 'almost' because a love like theirs cannot simply vanish, it can only be turned into something else, something that still allows to see the true nature of the feeling. Even before knowing the history between Heed and Christine, it is clear that the two of them shared a profound love; you do not hate with such an intensity someone you do not care about.

Then why do I say that there is optimism in them? The optimism resides in the fact that either one of them could have, at any point, abandoned the other without too many problems. Christine, who spent many years on the road by herself, could have easily found a way to live independently by herself, being the tenacious and resourceful woman that she is. The reason she cannot seem to settle down anywhere does stem from the continuous failure of the relationships she has with poorly chosen men, but the excuse she provided to go back to Monarch Street hid what her true desire was; going back to Heed.

The same is true for Heed. Although she did not have the possibility to travel undisturbed, Heed could have prevented Christine from living with her if she wanted to, so much so that Christine

had to force her way inside the house she knew to be, at the moment, property of Heed. What stopped her was only the desperate situation she found herself in at the time, “Heed’s look, cold and long, had been anything but inviting, so Christine just slammed past her through the door. With very few words they came to an agreement of sorts because May was hopeless, the place was filthy, Heed’s arthritis was disabling her hands, and because nobody in town could stand them” (Morrison, *Love* 86).

What their actions underline is their desire and their hope that they would one day find each other again. Their continuous fights are nothing more than the only way they have left to communicate in the vain hope that it still is not too late for them to reunite. And it is not too late, it never is, seems what this novel wants to communicate.

In my analysis of Heed and Christine’s final scene together through Said’s categories, I reached the conclusion that their ‘reunion’ did not amount to much in the end; Heed died without accomplishing anything, and Christine lost the only family she ever truly had. But reading this scene through this new category defined by optimism, one reached a completely different conclusion. Even if Heed dies in Christine’s arms, the two have finally found their words – the innocent, honest words that Cosey and May had taken away from them – to finally lay everything bare in the open. The fact that even after her death, Heed remains alive inside Christine, always by her side like she had wished her whole life, is nothing but the manifestation of the strength of their love capable of surviving even after death.

In this way, Christine can face her future with the reassurance that Heed is with her and that perhaps they will reunite again even in death.

Junior’s story is, in itself, one of optimism. Born in the poorest place one could imagine, surrounded by family that did nothing to encourage her, shunned by her classmates because of the place she was born into, it would have been easy for her to let herself be swallowed by the squalid life her entire family had resigned to. The way her own cousins and uncles hurt her should have been enough to scare her into submission. But Junior, instead of letting them dictate what her life is supposed to be like, reacts immediately to their threat, “In silence Junior watched her toes swell,

red, then blue, then black, then marble, then merge. The crayons were gone and the hand that once held them now clutched a knife ready for Vosh or an uncle or anyone stopping her from committing the Settlement version of crime: leaving, getting out” (Morrison, *Love* 59).

Her fleeing from the Settlement is not simply an action dictated by her need to protect herself, but by the hope and desire that things could change for her if she tried to do what she wanted. Even life at Correctional is something Junior chooses to consider as an educational experience that will allow her to better her life, and no matter the shock and hurt caused by the Director’s attempted assault, she never allows any of that to stop her in her journey.

Although for the most part of the novel, she acts almost as an anti-hero, trying to sweep Heed’s house under her nose, trying to cut out Christine from any inheritance, and striking up a relationship with a fourteen-year-old boy, there is no true malice in what she does.

The truth is that Junior is a character whose presence upsets the town, jerking it out of its suspended time between past and present, but her actions almost seem comparable to natural events that men simply cannot avoid, making her seem a necessary, if temporary evil that one cannot truly hate.

What truly makes her a symbol of hopefulness and optimism is her relationship with Romen, and how it ends – we do not know if temporarily or not. What for her had been nothing but a game from the start, nothing more than something else she could do to please Cosey’s spirit, reveals itself to be the last step of her journey toward both salvation and the chance to start a new life. One of the reasons that pushes Junior to leave her family behind is the complete lack of affection she feels for them and them for her.

Her relationship with Romen is not so different: she wants to have fun and pass the time, he wants to appear grown up in front of his schoolmates, especially after avoiding to participate in the rape of a young girl – a moment seen as a perverted rite of passage into manhood.

But Romen’s acceptance of her – whether for selfish reasons or not – is exactly what Junior was looking for all the years she spent wondering around. It is true that she was not expecting to find

acceptance right then and there – her plan failing because of her knee-jerk reaction is proof of that – but she does not let the chance escape her. After Romen leaves her alone in the house, Junior could have left but she has already decided. She does not need Cosey's spirit anymore, and she is ready to remain where she is and face the consequences of her actions.

She has reached her objective, she has showed herself to be different from the rest of the Settlement, and that is why her future opens up to her. Christine and Heed too recognized this change in her and the possibility it represents for all of them. Even if we do not know exactly how their confrontation will go, we know enough to know that Junior will face it head on with no fear, as she has done all her life to the point of conquering her future.

Even in what is probably the darkest and bleakest of Morrison's latest four published novels, *A Mercy*, each character's story exhibits elements of optimism, whether their story ends optimistically or not. As always, Rebekka and Lina represent once again an attempt at bettering their life, and hopefully their future, that unfortunately does not fully succeed, even if at first it had seemed so. To find optimism and hope in the life of these two women, one must look in the first half of their lives, when they suffered the most but were also able to stand up and react.

Rebekka's story at the beginning represented one of the darkest moment of her entire life, surrounded by violence in the form of the society she lived in – her parents take her to see public executions,

The first hangings she saw in the square amid a happy crowd attending. She was probably two years old, and the death faces would have frightened her if the crowd had not mocked and enjoyed them so. With the rest of her family and most of her neighbors, she was present at a drawing and quartering and, although she was too young to remember the details, her nightmares were made permanently vivid by years of retelling and describing by her parents. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 75)

–, the religious zealotry that left her feeling nauseated by religion, and the general mistreatment of her brothers and parents in her regard. The brief time she spent working as a maid in the mansion of a rich upper-class man, only strengthens the general sense of misery that permeates her entire life and that, at that point, seems to represent the only future she is likely to have.

In this context, her acceptance without protestations of her father's decision to practically sell her to Jacob represents for her the possibility of a brighter future that she is more than willing to grab onto. The meeting with the women on the ship, after her decision to try and make the most out of her new life is the final push she needed to truly believe in a better future – if prostitutes could face the uncertainty of the New World and feel sure that things would not be so bad, then she could do the same.

Meeting Jacob, a man who like her did not care for religion and was proud of his hard work in life, was the only confirmation she needed that her decision to hope against hope, and look at the future with optimism was the right one.

Lina, more subtly, behaves in the same way. We do not know what life in the village was like for her, but we can guess that she had a normal childhood until the epidemics took the life of everyone she knew. The time spent with the Presbyterians is much like the life Rebekka used to lead before coming to the New World; religion took away her name and gave her a doomed one, piety brought her pain and the elimination of her culture.

Meeting Jacob, much like it was for Rebekka, was for Lina the beginning of a new and better life, after the abuse she had to suffer at the hands of the Presbyterians. Moving to live with Jacob in his farm, mirrors Rebekka's moving across the Ocean to her new life. Perhaps their similar journey encouraged the initial harmony between the two of them, as they worked together for their better life.

Lina thrives in the farm, even more when Rebekka joins the solitary life she and Jacob were living – “the daily hardships of frontier life bringing them together in an alliance of survival that slowly turns into friendship” (Kakutani, *nytimes.com*) – and the way she has found to preserve her own culture seems worth it as Florens comes around and listens to everything she has to say. As we

already know, the good times for these two women end far quicker than they would have thought, Jacob being both the one who made a happier life for them possible and the one who took it away with his death. Because, as we know, “The orphans and waifs of Jacob’s farm are a community that threatens to disintegrate as soon as he is dead. Any affective bonds they have formed are frail compared to the imperatives of finding a new way to survive” (Mantel, *theguardian.com*).

However, what led both Rebekka and Lina to believe in the possibility, no matter how small or insignificant, of a brighter future was their unflinching belief in themselves and their willingness to hope beyond hope.

Much more significant because it relies on themselves and because it is repaid much more fairly by life, is Sorrow and Florens’ optimistic journey until the end of their story. Unlike Rebekka and Lina, Florens and Sorrow do not keep relying on someone else to fulfill their desire of a new and safer life as distanced as possible from the one they lived before. On the contrary, from early on they are left alone in their need and hope.

Florens, bought and uprooted from the only place she could realistically think of as a ‘home’, does lean on Lina for protection and guidance, but that is a reaction dictated by necessity as she is still a child who has just been abandoned by her mother, a separation that left her “with a hole in her heart and an abiding need for love and approval” (Kakutani, *nytimes.com*). However, as soon as the occasion to lead a better life presents itself – namely, the blacksmith’s arrival at the farm – Florens, of her own initiative, is quick to seize it.

Her drive to protect herself and her will to do what needs to be done to make her life better on her own, are stronger than merely hoping something would happen in her favor. This willingness to work through every obstacle is underlined by Florens’ unflinching determination to walk through whatever is hindering her path – Indians, beasts, demonic hearings – until she manages to get to her destination.

Even when her hopes get crushed because the blacksmith does not give her the stability and protection she wanted from him, Florens does not give up. Her attacking the blacksmith could be read

as her simply wanting to hurt him after he revealed himself to be just like her mother at the time – preferring a little boy to her – but I reckon it is more an act of fighting back against the latest trial set before her on her road to security.

As I remarked in the previous chapter, Florens’ hardened personality does not mean that she will end up putting herself at risk through her willing self-exile, it is confidence in herself and acknowledgement that no one will save her from this life if she does not save herself. The pessimism that Said noticed in the authors and novels he analyzed comes from an inability to change one’s condition and from having to witness one’s own failure.

Florens can and does change both herself and her life. She is a slave, she cannot change that part of the life she has to live, but she can change the way she takes it. David Gates in his review of the novel defines Florens’ growth into a woman who owns herself a “bitter blessing. Her only compensation for the loss of her mother and her lover is that she comes to write her own story” (Gates, *nytimes.com*), completely missing the utmost importance of what her action means for Florens and her future. Writing down her story, frees her from her past but it also gives her a starting point for her transformation.

Sorrow’s optimism takes on a much more tangible form; her daughter. Like Florens, Sorrow does not wait for life to somehow give her the opportunity to better herself; she already knows what she needs to feel complete. The appearance of Twin inside her makes this clear to us readers as well, before the birth of Sorrow’s daughter happens. Sorrow needs companionship in life if she wants to truly feel alive, that is the reason she creates Twin as soon as she loses her entire family, remaining alone in the world – a coping mechanism that will prove effective even at the farm, as Lina isolates herself for fear of her own wickedness spreading everywhere.

Even so, it is clear that Twin’s presence is not enough to soothe the ache she has inside. Up until the birth of her daughter, Sorrow does not display initiative in anything; she does what she is ordered, and she complies with the orders she receives without outing thought the thoughts behind her actions, impervious to criticism or punishment.

One cannot even say that she relies on the kindness of others as her behavior, and her numb thoughts regarding what surrounds her, makes it clear that she truly cannot find it in herself to care about what happens to her one way or another.

Sorrow does initially lose her chance to find happiness because she lets herself believe that she can rely on Lina. The death of her first baby is a lesson she does not need to learn again, the yawn she is sure she has seen is all she needs to learn that she can only rely on herself if she wants to survive in this world, “It had no name. Sorrow wept, but Twin told her not to. ‘I am always with you,’ she said. That was some consolation, but it took years for Sorrow’s steady thoughts of her baby breathing water under Lina’s palm to recede. With no one to talk to, she relied on Twin more and more” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 123).

When the time finally comes for her to give birth to her second baby, Sorrow does not let herself be caught unprepared; she knows what needs to be done, so she comes out of her usual apathy and takes care to make sure her baby will stay alive this time.

As I said, Sorrow does know herself and what she needs and although, like Florens, she cannot change her life as a slave – nor does she seem preoccupied by her social status – she can make certain her baby will be alive and well even if she will have to be a slave like her. The kindness the two men showed her is not something Sorrow regrets accepting, but it was searched for out of necessity not out of want; Sorrow will not repeat the mistake of leaning on someone else when it comes to her own life, her own happiness.

In her review of the novel, Hilary Mantel claims that “The character called ‘Sorrow’, who is dazed by the blows life has dealt her, rebaptises herself ‘Complete’ when she gives birth to a daughter, though it is hard to see what reason she has for optimism” (Mantel, *theguardian.com*). What Mantel fails to understand in her reading of Sorrow’s last scene in the chapter dedicated to her, is that as she holds her baby in her arms proclaiming to finally be complete, Sorrow is well aware of being at the start of a new life that she herself created with her own strength, something that might be taken away

from her, but that will never cease to be hers, “‘I am your mother,’ she said. ‘My name is Complete’” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 134).

When I analyzed Cee through Said’s categories, what emerged was a character that, for all her efforts, could not hope to achieve much in her future, especially considering how she is not allowed to distance herself from her brother but has to live with the constant possibility of falling back on old patterns of behavior. However, if we distance ourselves from Said, what we have is a completely different character. Cee’s one and only desire is to change her life, the way other people – Lenore and her brother Frank, to be more specific – consider her; the former as someone who has to be protected from anything and everything, the latter as a waste of space that should never have been born in the first place.

Her chance to try and change their view of her does not come until later in her life. Describing her childhood – from what little we know of her thought-processes at the time – she did not display any intention of wanting to decide for herself what to do with her life, content to let Frank hold the reins and guide her.

I do believe that such willingness to let others decide for her came from her fear of proving to Lenore that she was right in everything she had to say about her, because “‘What kind of selfhood is it possible to possess when we come from a spiritually impoverished home, one that fails to concede, let alone nourish, each inhabitant’s worth?’” (Cohen, *nytimes.com*). If she let Frank do everything, then she could not disappoint anyone.

Everything changes when Frank leaves, and Cee experiences for the first time the full blunt of what happens when you allow others to live your life for you. Cee had believed that following Prince had been the right decision, as it would allow her to be independent and choose for herself; she did no such thing, however, as all she truly did was give command of her life to a man who, unlike Frank, did not care for her or her well-being.

Cee does not seem to fully realize this as she, yet again, trusts blindly others instead of relying on herself. Sarah’s intention was not to hide what the doctor was doing – as indicated by the reaction

of the townswomen at the news that Cee was working for a white doctor, it was public knowledge what kind of research was being led, “Once they knew she had been working for a doctor, the eye-rolling and tooth-sucking was enough to make clear their scorn” (Morrison, *Home* 121) – and she demonstrates as much when she calls for help and aids Frank in saving Cee, “Sarah and the doctor remained locked in an undecipherable stare. [...]. ‘Don’t overplay your hand,’ he told her. ‘No, sir,’” answered Sarah, but her hand remained pressed down until the doctor descended the stairs to his office” (Morrison, *Home* 112).

This last lesson will be the one that finally alerts Cee of the fact that she is not confronting her problems in the correct way. Even after all that happened to her, Cee does still need the townswomen’s guidance to finally comprehend what she needs to do if she truly wishes to take control of her life and change before it is too late. The townswomen are the tangible proof that Cee needs to actually start believing in herself; they are poor women just like her who had to deal with everything life threw at them, each in her own way, letting nothing stop them.

Contrary to what Akbar affirms in his review of the book, that is, “Cee’s inner transformation is dealt with relatively briskly” (Akbar, *independent.com*), I found that the closing chapters detailing Cee’s growth, represent one of the strongest point of Morrison’s novel. As Cee lets the townswomen’s words scold her and shape her into a new woman that will not commit the same mistakes, we understand the reason why her previous attempt at changing herself did not work. The change was not something that she could receive from others or that she could live through others; the one who needed to change was simply Cee herself and that came from the realization that other people’s words could define her and her life only if she let them. She otherwise had to understand that even if he loves her, Frank cannot keep on treating her as if she were a child, and the only one who can make him stop, is her.

Among all this, I believe, however, Cee’s will in wanting to change in the first place was what truly allowed her to muster up the strength she needed, in the end, to stand up again and set foot into a brighter, if harder, future made up of the consequences of her own decisions that she is now ready

to confront. Although Wyatt in her book affirms that “The material conditions of Frank’s work and Cee’s work tie their lives to the past of slavery than opening a path to a better future” (Wyatt 168), the truth is that the two siblings do find themselves have a better future at their reach. It is important to take into consideration the historical context in which the novel is set: two poor, black, uneducated people coming from a rural town in Georgia before the Civil Rights movement could start changing the life of many African-Americans, could not realistically expect to have a successful future. Cee might never be rich, but she has a way to support herself and, much more important, she now understands what it means to live by herself and take care of herself, something that seemed impossible at the beginning of the novel.

Bride’s optimism for her future in *God Help the Child*, is deeply tied to her desire to let go of the past and move on with her life. In the chapter dedicated to how each character in Toni Morrison’s novels is future-oriented – instead of continuously looking at the past – I spoke about Bride’s peculiarity in that she already is ready to move on at the beginning of the book, instead of having to go through a journey of self-discovery to finally feel ready. She might not know what she has to do to get to the point where her future will be in her reach, but the will to act is already there.

When discussing *God Help the Child*, Jean Wyatt herself notices the presence of optimism in this novel and in what the characters must go through in order to find each their peace, “In *God Help the Child* the protagonists must overcome the profound effects of traumatic early loss of love in order to love again. While that may sound like a familiar story to readers of Morrison’s work, what differentiates the latest novel is the text’s optimism about the human capacity to do just that” (Wyatt 176).

In *Bride*, the optimism for the future is already present, in my own opinion, the day she left Sweetness to make something out of herself. After the way her mother treated her – much like in Cee’s case – it would have been easier to just accept all the things Sweetness said about her and the color of her skin as true and just give up on any dream of hers. *Bride*, however, does the exact opposite.

Free of the influence of her mother, she sets on making a name for herself in the beauty industry – and that Bride decides to work exactly in that type of industry after having been demeaned by her mother for her looks is not a coincidence, it serves to underline how went “from a child treated as if she were only her skin to a beautiful adult woman whose self-image is determined b her looks” (Wyatt 172). She takes her blue-black skin, so unsightly to her mother, and makes it into something that will make everyone, black or white, envious of her, she makes it into something profitable, “‘See?’ said Jeri. ‘Black sells. It’s the hottest commodity in the civilized world. White girls, even brown girls have to strip naked to get that kind of attention.’ True or not, it made me, remade me. I began to move differently – not a strut, not that pelvis-out rush of the runway – but a stride, slow and focused” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 36). She builds herself from zero and she manages to become successful with a line of make-up, YOU, GIRL that she herself invented; as John Pistelli correctly states, “Bride has come of age in a world where blackness is a commodity, and she is therefore able to vend her beauty successfully in the cosmetic industry” (Pistelli, *Wordpress.com*).

Bride’s entire story is characterized by an unyielding will to change her future, to make it something onto which she is the only one who has control. In *God Help the Child*, this is the definition of optimism, this force that will open up Bride’s future and make it possible for her to deny the future her mother had envisioned for her, one not impaired by the color of her skin.

Bride’s entire journey is based upon her firm conviction that she has to fix her mistake because she understands that her mother’s abuse cannot, and should not, act as an excuse for what she has done. This desire of hers, leads her to a much more profound understanding of the problem she has to face to truly change; she needs to make peace with herself, with the scared little girl she used to be and that she has tried to forget in any way possible. This attempt at erasing that part of her that she does not acknowledge is made all the more clear by her decision to change her name from Lula Ann to just Bride.

It is through little Raisin, through being able to look at a young mistreated girl from an outsider’s perspective, while knowing intimately the hurt, the rage, one feels at the way life has gone

for them, that Bride finally understands what she has to do. In that moment, protecting and helping Raisin, means protecting and helping little Lula Ann, it means accepting and forgiving the mistakes made by a little girl who only wanted to feel loved in the way she deserved:

My black lady is nice but though too. When we started walking back home after I told her everything about my life before Evelyn and Steve, a truck with big boys in it passed us. One of them hollered ‘Hey, Rain. Who’s your mammy?’ My black lady didn’t turn around but I stuck my tongue and thumbed my nose at him. [...]. The driver, an older boy, turned the truck around so they could come after us. Regis pointed a shotgun just like Steve’s at us. My black lady saw him and threw her arm in front of my face. [...]. 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. (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 105-106).

Once she has forgiven herself, Bride can finally confront the man who left her and explain to him the motivation behind her actions, something she could not have done before forgiving herself.

Bride’s resolution in facing Booker for the sole purpose of telling the truth as it is and get answers out of him – her refusal to “rest in the position of victim abandoned by her man” (Wyatt 183) – is yet another sign that she now knows her change is in her reach; the last thing tying her to her past is Booker’s “You not the woman” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 12).

Bride’s eyes are fixed on her future because of the determination to change present within herself since the beginning. She succeeds in fixing her past and her life only relying on herself, only accepting herself at long last. Unlike what John Pistelli negatively affirms in his review of the book by saying, “when Booker and Bride are, at the ending of the novel, about to become parents, the vow that things will be different. But the narrator gently and decisively corrects them” (Pistelli, *Wordpress.com*), because of the final lapidary words of the chapter “So they believe” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 175), in my opinion, there is no foreshadowing of Bride and Booker’s failure in raising their child in a much healthier way than they experienced. In fact, the culmination of Bride’s journey

takes a physical form in the baby now growing inside her, a manifestation of the multitude of possibilities she now has in front of her eyes.

## Chapter 2.4

In this final chapter, I wish to discuss the conclusion one draws from analyzing Said's categories of late style. Said's late style concerns only male authors who write exclusively about male characters and is characterized, in general terms, by melancholy generated by the awareness of the past being long gone and unreachable; rage born out of the frustration of being unable to go beyond one's limits as an artist; pessimism brought about by the ever-closer final end beyond which there is nothing, leading one to think that nothing then has meaning or importance.

This late style, as such, finds its foundations in negativity, in difficulty, in uncooperativeness, and so cannot but lead to an end that cannot be transcended. This late style is closure that cuts down any future hope or fantasy, and drains the author of any lasting will. It is a late style that declares the true ending of an author's career without giving second chances. It is the limit of an author's creativity beyond which one cannot go. It is the end that the author cannot fully accept and that he fights against until the very end.

This negativity is completely absent in Toni Morrison's late style. Her interview with Torrence Boone is telling of her state of mind and of the will to keep on moving forward within her, "For me it's a big effort to write brand new. You know, every time I sit down to write is like I've never written anything ever before. It's a brand new thing" (Talks at Google, *youtube.com* 00:42:55-00:43:09). In her, there is no need to feel melancholy for the past, as it is gone and it has served its purpose. There is no need for rage caused by the impossibility to go beyond the limits of the humanly possible, because one has to focus on the present day and what one can do. There is no need for pessimism when what one has done in life, what one has suffered through the years, has allowed us to grow and leave a lasting mark – no matter how small or insignificant – in our life and around us.

Toni Morrison's late style is not an ending, but a new beginning. It not closure, but an opening upon a future full of possibilities. The constant theme in Morrison's latest four published novels is

that the past has the power to still hurt us in the present, it can still control us in some ways, but it is also our greatest ally. The past cannot be changed, but we can learn from it, as Morrison's characters do, and in that moment, it becomes the gateway to the future.

All of Morrison's characters are deeply flawed beings that nonetheless fight for their future after having accepted their past and having made peace with it. Although mindful of their past, they do not let the traumas that live in it define who they will become; they all possess the will and the determination to stand up on their own feet and move forward with their lives. It is definitely not a painless process, but it is one that none of them shies away from, "Maybe they don't have a car or maybe they don't have their loved one or whatever. But this is the life of the mind and the spirit. And they win" (Manufacturing Intellect, *youtube.com* 00:15:14-00:15:22).

This will is otherwise justly rewarded as they each find the end of their journeys, on a hopeful note. Toni Morrison's use of the open ending in novels so closely tied to the themes of accepting what has happened in the past, learning from it, and then moving forward, is the formal that underlines the vault of possibilities, the multitude of roads that these characters can possibly choose from. Toni Morrison leaves her characters, and us too, on the cusp of something more about to happen, at the very beginning of a future that can be whatever one decides.

Heed and Christine's ending perfectly encapsulates how Toni Morrison leaves her characters right at the beginning of a new life. What makes their reconciliation at the end feel not only rewarding but long overdue, is the knowledge of how their lives have been a constant struggle. Of course, their main fight was the one between the two of them, a fight revolving around repressed and embittered love. But, in truth, both Heed and Christine have been surrounded by people who wished them ill and hurt them, in sometimes cruel and despicable ways.

Both had to confront themselves with the fact that, for their mothers, they were nothing more than tools to get what they wanted. Heed's mother uses her as a bargaining chip, together with her father, so that she can have access to the money Cosey is said to have accumulated throughout his life. Christine is forced to acknowledge that May only had eyes for Cosey and his inheritance. May

keeps Christine far away from her home, making her feel abandoned and rejected, and only seems to consider Christine her daughter, when the time comes to talk about Cosey's will.

While Christine is gone, Heed has to live surrounded by an entire town that considers her the sole responsible for Cosey's decision to marry her, as if a twelve-year-old child could be the one to seduce an old man. Furthermore, she has to live in the same house as the woman who detests her and wishes nothing more than to see her thrown in the streets like the dirt-poor girl she is and always will be,

But nothing Heed did – not spreading lies, inventing outrages, seeking advice from psychiatric institutions – could force May out. With L watching and without an accomplice, Heed failed. She was forced to put up with the dazzling clarity of the woman who hated her almost as much as Christine did. May's war did not end when Cosey died. She spent her last year watching in ecstasy as Heed's grasping hands turned slowly into wings" (Morrison, *Love* 99) .

Christine, on her part, has to live a nomadic life, never allowed to go back home to a mother she cannot stand and a best friend who seems intent on stealing everything from her – her home, her family, then her inheritance. To this life lacking roots and stability, one must add her relationships with men who cheat on her, abandon her for someone younger, or reveal themselves to be exactly like all the other lowlifes she has dated.

The tipping point that will convince her of the necessity to go back and claim her own home for herself, is the way her latest lover – the one who actually seemed a man she could remain with – disregards the rape of a young girl, showing her exactly how much he truly cared for her. Adding to that last hit from the man she loved, she remains shocked by the swirl of red flushed down the toilet after her seventh abortion, the only time she wonders about the life that could have been and never happened, "So when the end arrived, it was unrecognizable as such. A small, quite insignificant toilet flush. After a routine abortion, the last of seven, she rose, tapped the lever, and turned to watch the

swirl. There, in a blur of congealed red, she thought she saw a profile. For less than a second that completely impossible image surfaced” (Morrison, *Love* 164).

After such lives constellated by pain, humiliations and bitter fights among best friends, a cruel ending for these women, one where they never found a way to reconcile their disagreements and heal their wounds, seemed inevitable. When I analyzed the conclusion of these two women’s stories, this is exactly what seemed to happen, as the conversation between the two did not seem enough to lay to rest their bitter fight and find redemption. Instead, they do reconcile, they do heal each other’s wounds and, among them, share the bitter knowledge of what has been done to them, the injustice of having their love turned into something dark that divided them for their whole life.

Through their honest confession, their acceptance of what happened and their shared pain, the two women become one, “Only real conversation [...] can restore understanding between the old women Morrison shows ‘how precious the tongue is’ – it may reconstruct confused narratives, rebuild broken homes, tolerate their intolerable pain” (Sethi, *theguardian.com*). Their childhood dream turned into reality, they set out about living their life finally aware that now no one can ever separate them. In their first step toward a future we do not get to see, there is no pain, no anger, no bitterness, there is only their love and the will to help Junior make the best of herself.

I have already stated how, in a certain way, Junior, apart from being a medium for Cosey’s spirit, is the sum of Heed and Christine’s characters. Much like the two women, pain, betrayals, the judgment of others, and the impossibility of going home constellate her life – she does not really have one. She has to live with the knowledge that her father decided to leave her behind when he left her mother, all through no fault of her own.

Her mother did not care enough to actually protect her and teach her how to survive in the Settlement or out of it, leaving her to the mercy of men who intentionally hurt her just because she did not return a snake to its ‘rightful’ place, “‘Ma!’ she called. ‘Leave her ‘lone, you goddam polecats!’ screamed Vivian. She took a few running steps before fatigue ended in futile rock-throwing

at the backs of her younger brothers. ‘Leave her ‘lone! Come back here, you skunks! You better mind me!’ [...]. Vivian could not protect her from Vosh or the uncles” (Morrison, *Love* 58)

Once free of the Settlement, a place she never truly sees as a home but just as a place she had to stay in, she finds herself confronted with the reality of life on her own with no one to help her, take care of her, or teach her what to do. Correctional, a place that at first appears to be a safe haven while Junior grows up and learns how to survive on her own, “Some of the education at Correctional was academic; most of it was not. Both kinds honed the cunning needed to secure a place in a big, fancy house on Monarch Street” (Morrison, *Love* 59), sends her away in a way she could have never imagined. Almost sexually assaulted by the Director of Correctional, Junior, much like Heed, is considered the one responsible for the traumatic event, “The Committee, pained by Junior’s use of the word ‘lick’ in her defense, quickly transferred her from student to inmate for a violence they could only shake their heads at” (Morrison, *Love* 117).

From that point onward, she is forced to take care of herself as Correctional sends her away, ignoring her accusations against the Director. The only company she has in life is the spirit of a dead man whom she feels connected to from the very moment they ‘meet’.

From Correctional, she moves into another environment that does not give her respite. The number 1 on Monarch Street is a mansion filled to the brim with bitterness, anger, and a rivalry that more than once blossoms into physical encounters.

Junior thrives in this atmosphere filled with negativity, encouraged by Cosey’s spirit and actually proud of how she managed to trick both Heed and Christine into letting her stay even while she intends to steal the house from right under their noses. Her relationship with a fourteen-year-old boy and the wickedness she displays in her last moments with Heed, would lead us to believe that she – a sort of anti-hero to Heed and Christine – is headed toward a grim future. In fact this is the conclusion that one is forced to draw when analyzing this character through Said’s study of late style, conclusion that seems inevitable, especially when Christine survives and manages to go back home with Romen’s help,

Junior lowers her eyes, thinking what the fuck is the matter with her who does she think she is I'm helping her steal or trick or lie and she talks to me like a warden? Saying, "In 1964 he might have" "No he wouldn't. You don't know what you talking about." "Well, a ballpoint proves it's more recent, doesn't it? A later version," idiot. "You think?" "Sure," you ignorant bitch. "Maybe you right. Okay. Here's what you say." Heed closes her eyes and dictates. "I leave all my worldly good to my dear wife Heed the Night..." Junior looks up but doesn't say anything. It's clear why the Good Man stopped liking her – if he ever did. "Worldly good." Is he listening? Is he laughing? Is he here? She can't tell. (Morrison, *Love* 176).

Instead, Morrison offers even to this character the deliverance it needed and deserved. Right at the end, it is exactly her scandalous relationship with Romen that saves her and makes her realize that she has a future ahead of her, that she does not need a spirit to cherish her and make her feel good, nor does she need to steal anybody's house as the two Cosey women she has tried to eliminate, know and understand her in ways she cannot even imagine.

At long last, Junior is allowed her peace, her place to stay in with a woman who knows what she has been through and who, for that very reason, will not abandon her. From that point on, though we do not see this, it is clear that Junior's life has just begun, with a freedom of choice she never had.

In the background of all these characters' stories coming to their just and fair end, we have the resolution of L's story. For the entirety of the story, we believe her to be a character detached from the story, unwilling to take part in it just as she avoided any involvement in Bill Cosey's story.

Her continuous observations regarding what happens, expanding on past events that we only see through the characters' biased eyes, make her the one who provides us with an external perspective to the story, telling us what really happened between the characters: May's submission to her husband's father and the hotel she dedicates her life to; Cosey's loss of his wife and son, his marriage to Heed and his affair with Celestial; Heed and Christine's beginning as friends.

As she reveals to us what happened between the two women, L's words inevitably point out her own fault in what happened; she never directly intervened to help Heed or Christine, save once and that single intervention was simply too tiny and too late. Her atonement, if one wishes to see it like that, is represented in her eyes by her decision to kill Bill Cosey before he can further ruin the women in his life, "I had to stop him. Had to" (Morrison, *Love* 200). Even so, her intervention did not put an end to the bitter crusade May started, nor did it settle matters between Heed and Christine.

The three women come to the point of attacking one another right during Cosey's funeral, prompting L's last intervention before abandoning the three Cosey women to their destiny. L, who we will discover died before the beginning of the novel, will spend her remaining time watching from afar the happenings in Monarch Street.

Only at the very end, having witnessed the reunion between Heed and Christine, will she finally allow herself to go in peace. Right in front of Bill Cosey's tombstone, L rests definitely in peace, finally knowing closure after the years of having to witness the effects of her inaction.

When it comes to stories set during slavery, one can be quite sure that they will not end in redemption, peace and deliverance. It is for this reason that in *A Mercy*, I find Sorrow and Florens' ending particularly fitting and realistic, all thanks to the open ending Toni Morrison decided to employ in this story of women finding and losing themselves.

Although we already know neither Florens nor Sorrow, no matter how their story stops, will reach a happy ending – both of them being slaves – their journey throughout the story does leave them in a favorable condition to face what will undoubtedly be a harsh and horrific life.

Weak and submissive Florens, always needing someone to shield her, love her and put her in the first place, will have to grow into herself if she wants to survive now that she has no one to stand by her side.

First shielded by her mother, who manages to protect her in the only way she can think of – having her sold to a man who does not relish in the ownership of slaves, "I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him.

Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. [...]. It was a mercy” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 166) – a sacrifice that Florens does not understand, then protected in any way possible by Lina –, she is taught all that the Native woman knows, as well as she is warned never to go to the blacksmith – Florens’ first years pass as sheltered as they can realistically be.

Apart from the pain of having been abandoned, Florens lives a relatively easy life compared to her mother and other slaves. Ironically, the one who will destroy her peaceful existence will be the man she believed would provide her with a stable and safe environment; as Kakutani correctly states in her review of the novel on *The New York Times*, through the blacksmith’s rejection, “Florens learns the peril of caring too much – and the legacy of loss and leaving bequeathed to her by her mother” (Kakutani, *nytimes.com*). Along the journey to where the blacksmith lives by himself, Florens finds herself involved in several dangerous situations, especially as a slave like her, considering that the possession of a paper signed by Rebekka is not enough to keep her safe.

Even though she risks her life more than once, Florens never stops believing that the blacksmith will be her safe haven once she arrives, not realizing that she is merely swapping “one slavery for another” (Adams, *theguardian.com*). The obstacle to her happiness once reached her love, is the little boy the blacksmith has taken in. Once again, Florens is confronted with the trauma of being cast aside; once again, she fails to read the situation correctly, but unlike the last time when she was still a child, this time she can and does react, “Florens swings the tongs and hits him, trying to prevent the ‘expel’, trying to annihilate the one who is repeating in the external world the drama of maternal rejection that dominates her internal world” (Wyatt 134).

It is not clear whether she has only attacked the blacksmith, or if she has killed him – thus condemning to death even the boy, literally ‘slaying’ her fear. What is clear though is that the Florens who returns to the Vaark’s Farm is no longer the child who needs to rely on others to survive. And it is just as well because the farm she returns to is now run by a hollowed out Rebekka, and an empty and numb Lina. When I analyzed Florens through Said’s categories, I was led to believe that the way Florens isolates herself, much like Sorrow does, would result in both of them being unable to move

on with their lives, instead remaining forever stuck in the moment of their rejection of others. However, her isolation does not imply that she is doomed, quite the contrary. Although she has not found her love, nor has she found a way to truly lay her past to rest, Florens has grown harder than before, the only quality that could save her in the life of slavery that awaits her.

Although she reaches the same conclusion as Florens, Sorrow's journey could not be any more different. Sorrow never felt the need to have someone shield her, not being too interested in herself to care whether she was being sold or exchanged, and to whom. However, Sorrow does need love to survive, just as Florens believed she needed it too. Much like the younger woman, Sorrow does undertake a journey along which she does not risk her life in the strictest sense of the word, but she does become the victim of sexual abuse – though her typical numbness to what happens around and to her seems to spare her the traumatic psychological consequences.

In a sense, Sorrow could be said to take on Florens' mother role in the next generation of mothers being separated from their daughters. Once at the farm, while completely isolated from the rest of the women living there, Sorrow does strike an unlikely relationship based on reciprocal understanding with the two indentured male slaves, and with the blacksmith who saves her life when she seemed destined to die.

What the other women seemed to ignore in their concern for each other and themselves, is what the men at the farm can clearly see – Sorrow is the only one who has learned how to adapt to any possible situation, “Her privacy protected her; her easy coupling a present to herself. When pregnant, she glowed and when her time came she sought help in exactly the right place from the right people” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 152). An analysis of Sorrow through Said's categories seemed to suggest a lack of interest in herself, and what happened around her, that carried on even after her daughter's birth in the form of a willing self-isolation. However, what seemed numbness, aloofness, or general disinterest, was actually Sorrow's perceptive mind allowing her to accept the situation she was in, adapting to it without too many problems. That is why she understands the blacksmith better

than Florens ever will; she sees that he is not a man who will ever give up his freedom to tie himself to a woman who is not as free as he is.

But what truly allows Sorrow to succeed in surviving when Rebekka and Lina fail, is her finding herself through the birth of her daughter. Where Florens hardens herself enough that she knows she can take on anything life will throw her way, Sorrow finds her way to survive in becoming a mother. The birth of the daughter is what makes Sorrow complete, “‘I am your mother,’ she said. ‘My name is Complete’” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 134), puts her definitively in the role previously filled by Florens’ mother.

It is clear that Sorrow and her daughter will be separated sooner or later, especially when one considers the state in which the farm is and so Sorrow’s daughter will likely end up living a life like Florens. However, exactly because we saw how Florens matured and found a way to take care of herself, even if completely alone, Sorrow’s ending loses the bitterness implied in her final moment in the chapter, and leaves us feeling hopeful in the baby’s survival.

In *A Mercy*, the opening offered by Toni Morrison does not come from reuniting with one’s lost love, nor does it come in the possibility of a future filled with promise. It comes from the awareness that one is ready and capable of surviving relying only on one’s strength and resilience.

*Home* offers yet another possibility of opening at the end of one’s story. Cee’s ending can be considered as a sum of what made Junior and Florens two characters successful in their endeavors. Cee’s childhood strongly resembles Florens’, although the two women live in such different worlds, one cannot help but equate Cee’s dependence on her brother, to Florens’ need of protection and love from Lina.

Cee’s family situation, although different in context, reminds us of Junior’s. Cee’s parents did not abandon their children, their absence is due to them working all day long to make sure they can feed Frank and Cee, but the abuse Lenore heaps on top of Frank – physical abuse –, and most of all Cee – emotional abuse that leaves her totally incapable of believing in her own worth –, does resemble the harsh treatment Junior had to endure at the hands of her family.

Because of their similarities, it is only logical that Cee's closure comes as a mixture of the other two women's. Even if the societies they live in are completely different – Cee lives in the 1950s, Junior in the 1990s, and Florens in the 1600s – the journeys they have to undertake are remarkably similar.

Cee starts off as a quiet girl, quick to comply with the orders given to her, never voicing her opinion and always dependent on others. She believes that living with her love, a man as silent and self-centered as Florens' blacksmith was, will be the only way she will ever know peace and stability, the two things she has lost because of her brother leaving for the war.

However, much like Florens, she is forced to face the reality of her naiveté; love cannot give her what she needs to survive on her own in a world that will show her no mercy. The alternative she has to make some money and hopefully find a way to get back on her feet, leads her down a path remarkably similar to Junior's. She accepts the job at the doctor's mansion with a clear objective in mind, only to find herself involved in a situation that will change her completely.

Where Junior finds acceptance, Cee finds the hard confrontation with the reality that she should have recognized a long time ago. And yet, that is her rebirth, her salvation. Cee is reborn, literally brought back to life by women wise beyond their years, women who refuse to treat her with silk gloves and who understand her like only mothers could. Cee's rebirth gives life to a new and hardened woman, no longer in need of her brother's constant support, a woman who can take control of her life and be true to herself, "Meantime her brother was there with her, which was very comforting, but she didn't need him as she had before. He had literally saved her life, but she neither missed nor wanted his fingers at the nape of her neck telling her not to cry, that everything would be all right. Some things, perhaps, but not everything" (Morrison, *Home* 131).

Cee's ending brings her closure with her past – Lenore's words can no longer touch her, Prince's lies can no longer leave her stranded alone – and opens up the gates of her future, sure as she is now of her own capabilities and of her determination to live by her brother's side, no longer behind him. In the words of Arifa Akbar, who reviewed the novel in *The Independent*, "Lotus transforms

into a place of salvation on the siblings' return, with its community of benign womenfolk who act as Cee's healers. Her recovery from a serious condition, with the help of these women, shows that new homes and havens can be re-forged from old" (Akbar, *independent.co.uk*).

The opening at the end in *Home*, is a woman who takes control of her own life, who grows into herself and does not let anyone else rule her, making her the sole creator of her own future in a book's ending that is "not uniformly happy, but fraught with sorrow" as Cee has to "mourn the child she will never have" (Wyatt 168).

For *Bride* in *God Help the Child*, closure comes from her acceptance of herself and the mistakes she made as a child. While all the women from the previous novels faced physical trials to reach their final destination, *Bride's* is more of an emotional journey within herself.

Her first attempt at reconciliation ends up in a physical altercation with Sofia which leaves her severely wounded and makes her question her decision. Coupled with the emotional pain of having to deal with Booker's lapidary words, the physical pain is enough to disrupt her life and give Brooklyn the opening she needed to start stealing *Bride's* job.

It is Sofia's aggression which prompts the first ideas of leaving town for a bit to recuperate, and it is this physical fight that sets *Bride* on edge and pushes her to act. What shocked *Bride* more than anything about Sofia's aggression, was how she took her beating without even trying to protect herself, reverting back to the way she used to be as a child, the child she wants to forget, the child who represents her greatest weakness,

I don't know. Maybe I'm just mad more at myself than at Mrs. Huxley. I reverted back to the Lula Ann who never fought back. Ever. I just lay there while she beat the shit out of me. I could have died on the floor of that motel room if her face hadn't gone apple-red with fatigue. I didn't make a sound, didn't even raise a hand to protect myself when she slapped my face then punched me in the ribs before smashing my jaw with her fist then butting my head with hers (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 32).

What Bride does to shy away from her fragile state, is to focus on the problem she can fix; Booker. Finding him and forcing him to explain to her what he meant when he said “You not the woman” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 12), becomes Bride’s only mission. Her need to know what those words mean becomes even more pressing, because her body is starting to lose the traits that make her a woman; she is literally becoming not a woman, but a child.

Toni Morrison does not explicitly provide an explanation for Bride’s physical regression to the body of a child, so readers are pushed to devise their own theory as to what exactly is the meaning behind this supernatural change. Wyatt’s hypothesis is that Bride’s change “embodies Bride’s temptation to remain stuck in the time of trauma – to remain the little black girl cruelly unloved by a colorist mother” (Wyatt 182).

Although I do agree that this supernatural change is a reflection of Bride’s inner turmoil, the word ‘temptation’ is not the appropriate one to use in this context. In my opinion, what prompts the change in her body is the fear of going back to being a scared, defenseless girl capable only of suffering without doing anything to protect herself, instead of reacting, brought forth by Booker giving voice to that deep-seated fear by saying “You not the woman” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 12). This is because, as Wyatt herself goes on to say, “Booker’s rejection all too closely resembles her mother’s, and it reawakens all the feelings associated with that original self-annihilating trauma” (Wyatt 184).

It is because of this that I say that Bride’s journey is an emotional one, not a physical one. Her leaving town is not about Booker, it is not about wanting to know why their relationship did not work out; it is about her finding herself and taking control of her life.

Meeting Raisin and understanding for herself how a little girl has no fault in the way she is raised, is what Bride needed to start forgiving herself and accepting the child she was and that she wanted to pretend did not exist anymore.

Once she realizes that, the only thing left to do is tell the truth, the truth of that child, to the man who accused her out loud of not being a woman. Once Bride has screamed in Booker’s face why

she did what she did, “‘You lied? What the hell for?’ ‘So my mother would hold my hand!’ ‘What?’ ‘And look at me with proud eyes, for once.’ ‘So, did she?’ ‘Yes. She even liked me’” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 153-154) finally fighting back – physically –, defending the reasons of the mistreated child she was, against someone who wounded her, her body finally returns back to normal. Her demons and her fears are exorcised because she has finally admitted out loud that the only thing she ever wanted was affection.

Her story finds definitive closure when she informs her mother of the fact that she is going to have a child. If through Said’s perspective such scene seemed to reveal her unwillingness to confront her mother face to face, reading it by keeping in mind Toni Morrison’s hopeful late style, we can understand that the letter was never about Sweetness, it was about Bride.

Bride does not need to meet her mother face to face to find peace; she has done that on her own. The letter is simply a way to cut ties with her mother, for good this time. From that moment on, Bride is free to face her new life as a new woman with her new family, Booker included or not. It is the goodbye of a woman who, in the end, understood her mother and what pushed her to raise her the way she did, and who wishes to part from the woman who hurt her more than anyone else ever has or will.

Bride’s final letter is the inevitable result of what Sweetness herself comes to understand, “‘Taught me a lesson I should have known all along. What you do to children matters. And they might never forget’” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 43).

## Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that, it is reasonable to assume that late style has to be tackled while bearing in mind that men and women experience aging and the getting approaching the end of one's life in different ways. Saying that women experience the end of their lives differently does not automatically imply that there are no points of convergence between the late style of the men Said analyzes in his collection of essays, and the late style of an author like Toni Morrison.

In the first part of this thesis – the one dedicated to the analysis of Toni Morrison's four latest novels through the categories of late style conceived by Edward Said – I have shown how it is in fact possible to trace several elements in Morrison's novels that can be considered as belonging to Said's categories: there is the presence of characters shackled by their ties to their past, characters who are unable to build a future for themselves, who cannot change their lives; there is the denial of death in the form of ghostly appearances and an unhealthy attachment to a deceased loved one.

The presence of such elements is only logical in the works of a writer who was in her late 70s when she wrote *Love*, and in her early 80s when she wrote her latest novel, *God Help the Child*. As much as men and women, as I have stated in the introduction to the second part of this thesis, are different in many respects, both inevitably face doubts, fear, even denial when confronting the fact that end of their life is getting closer and closer.

However, what the second part of this thesis shows us – the one dedicated to the analysis of the same four novels, but without letting Said's categories of late style influence the reading – is that women do not go through exactly the same thought processes of men when dealing with the end. In her novels, Toni Morrison seems to touch upon Said's categories while also going beyond their limited scope. The difference in the two styles is all in the nuances that Toni Morrison inserts in her stories and in her characters.

As can be seen in the two parts of this thesis, the same scenes can be read in two different ways so that if Said's study leads us in one direction and guides us towards a given conclusion, paying attention exclusively to what Toni Morrison is saying through her characters will lead us in a completely opposite direction. Such peculiarity is not a surprise in a writer like Morrison whose novels, overbrimming with clues as to what has happened to the characters spread throughout the text, seem to be structured almost as detective stories.

I do believe that many differences between Said's late style and Toni Morrison's can be attributed to the different mindset of the male authors and composers Said analyzes in his collection of essays, when compared to Toni Morrison herself. The men presented by Said are all in denial, all desperate for a way to delay their end, men who, most of the time, are also openly in contrast with the society they have to live in. All these reasons, and many others, are the perfect explanation for the negativity that both Said and Adorno detect in their works.

One needs only to listen to Toni Morrison speak in any of her most recent interviews to immediately notice how different her state of mind is compared to those men. Despite her age, she is still an extremely lively and quick-witted woman, always ready and eager to discuss at length her works and her ideas. More than once she stated how, whenever she sits down to write, it still feels like she is putting pen-to-paper for the very first time. And it is this mentality, this ability to keep on writing no matter how many years have passed since she published her first novel that makes her stand apart from the male authors analyzed by Said. There is no melancholy in her; no rage at the limited time left to live, but a serene and hopeful attitude easily detectable in her novels.

Although this thesis focuses exclusively on Toni Morrison, and can in no way claim that this peculiarity in her late style can be considered as characterizing all late novels written by female authors, I do believe it to be a good starting point to tackle the subject of the differing late styles of men and women on a much broader scale. Only a deeper analysis of the late novels of several female authors will be able to reveal whether the differences I noticed are to be expected in all female authors,

or whether they must be ascribed to Toni Morrison's state of mind and acceptance of the world around her.

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