

# Enchantment as a Subversive Force in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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**Abstract** There is a substantial body of scholarship arguing for the relevance of magic realism to Toni Morrison's fictional production, with one exception being her last novel *God Help the Child*, which, in that respect, has been remarkably overlooked. The present paper intends to fill this scholarly gap by focusing on what Morrison called "enchantment", a powerful blend of magic and realism that she employed to represent a host of racial and ancestral issues of Blackness, often of a traumatic kind.

**Keywords** Toni Morrison. *God Help the Child*. Magical realism. Enchantment. Colorism.

**Summary** 1 Magical Realism: an Ambiguous Expression. – 2 Toni Morrison and Magic Realism. – 3 Enchantment and *God Help the Child*. – 4 Conclusion.



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## 1 Magical Realism: an Ambiguous Expression

Magical realism is an ambiguous mode, which has long been an object of controversy (Reeds 2006, 175). As Kenneth Reeds explains, the issue took front and center at a conference of Latin American scholars held at Michigan State University in 1973. In the keynote speech, Emil Rodríguez Monegal famously captured the spirit of the debate by referring to it as a “diálogo de sordos”, i.e., by claiming that numerous critics had been using the same term with radically different connotations (Reeds 2006, 185). The primary goal of the conference was to work out a consensual definition but, after careful consideration, the attempt failed, so much that several participants, among which was Monegal himself, suggested that “because of lack of agreement, the term should be eliminated completely” (Menton 1983, 9).

Yet, despite the critical differences, not only did magical realism withstand the test of time (Reeds 2006, 192) but, especially, in recent years, great progress has been made at a definition of the concept.

The juxtaposition of the fantastic to realism that marks the genre has been conceptualized as a form of “resistance to the violence of official history” (Donadey quoted in Ngom 2020, 196) and as an attempt to battle representations of reality that have been encumbered by colonizing influences (Hart, Ouyang 2005, 6). Indeed, as Zamora and Faris note, “the most appealing aspect of magical realism” is the urge to “reestablish contact with traditions temporarily eclipsed by the mimetic constraints” of the well-known “nineteenth and twentieth-century realism” (Zamora, Faris 1995, 2), with the quintessential example of such a phenomenon being Chinua Achebe’s groundbreaking novel *Things Fall Apart*.

At the heart of this line of reasoning lies the idea that, despite appearances, realism, with “its emphasis on the empirical, the familiar and the accumulation of everyday detail [...] has no greater claim to truth than do modes that make space for the supernatural or the mythical” (Warnes, Sasser 2020, 3-4). On the contrary, realism’s alleged mimetic power is but a rhetorical artifice, while magic – which is, in turn, often associated with illusion – is better suited to point the way to truth: in Warnes and Sasser’s terms, “magical realism expands and subverts the limitations of literary realism” (Warnes, Sasser 2020, 4).

Despite having been promoted primarily as a Latin American experience, magical realism has swiftly traversed borders and can now be encountered in narratives from other parts of the world (Reeds 2006, 192). In that respect, as far as the United States are concerned, the first instances of magical realism appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, in the short fiction of Bernard Malamud and in novels such as Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, but their specificity was eclipsed

by the irruption on the literary scene of equally innovative texts such as the postmodernist ones. Consequently, magical realism remained in the background of the national literary panorama until writers like Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich began to utilize such a mode in their best-sellers *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* (Shroeder 2020, 166).

## 2 Toni Morrison and Magic Realism

As far as Toni Morrison is concerned, there is a substantial body of scholarship arguing for the relevance of magic realism to her fiction - particularly to *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* - with one notable exception being her last novel *God Help the Child*, which, in that respect, has been remarkably overlooked. While it has mainly been read for the aesthetics of Blackness, the emphasis on motherhood and the building of identity in the face of childhood trauma, the rich magical realist dimension that characterizes *God Help the Child* has been tackled in a very limited number of contributions (Guo 2021; Ibarrola-Armendariz 2019; Princey, Purey 2019; Raynaud 2019) and not always in very convincing terms. Most of these pieces,<sup>1</sup> in fact, fail to acknowledge that not only did Toni Morrison not intentionally pursue magical realism within her literary work, but she also famously rejected any explicit association with such a label.

Morrison admitted to disliking having her fiction described as magical realist, an expression that she, most likely as a reaction to the sterile debate mentioned above, perceived as “evasive”. More precisely, she felt that it had long been employed by critics as a “convenient” strategy to “skip the truth in the art of certain writers” (Davis 1994, 143), with the “truth”, I argue, being the dimension of social commitment - namely, the often-radical political issues at the heart of much fiction. Morrison went on to expand her argument by explaining that, in the case of Black American writers, the popular usage of the term had been influenced by racism: having been referred to work authored by “discredited people”, the expression had been reduced to a token of exoticism devoid of any real substance or clout, thus ending up becoming synonymous with “illiterate” (Caldwell 1987, 243). In a later interview, she further elaborated on her position, by explaining that she felt that the “magical realism” category - probably due to the aforementioned associations with Latin American history and culture, i.e. with a “non-black cultural legacy” (Peach 1995, 13) - eclipsed the cultural paradigms on which she had founded her literary production. Actually, the term that Morrison

<sup>1</sup> With one notable exception being Raynaud 2019.

preferred to describe her distinctive approach to the world was “enchantment” (Davis 1994, 144), a technique which she employed with a mimetic intent - i.e. to mirror the “(w)holistic reality” that characterizes her people’s collective perception of the world” (Evans 1984, 489), a unique blend of “primitive, animistic beliefs” and “Western scientific positivism” (Simal González 1996, 314).

Simal González ascribes Morrison’s position against magical realism to a “rather narrow” vision: the scholar, in fact, asserts that, far from being “just another evasive label”, magic realism reflects, instead, a ground-breaking attitude, both from a linguistic and thematic viewpoint, in that “it stands up for the counterculture of imagination that creates new visions of the world” and “leaves no room for oppression and lack of freedom” (Simal González 1996, 317). Interestingly, Foreman affirms that, “unlike the fantastic or the surreal”, magical realism posits that the individual is “historically constructed and connected” with “the traditions and the faith” of a community (Foreman 1995, 299). As a matter of fact, Langdon states that “magical realist narratives are often - if not always - anchored to an historical moment”, and as such often tackle “violent and traumatic events [...]”. Besides, concludes the scholar, “the magical or un-real in these narratives [...] often fulfills a subversive purpose, attempting to highlight the falsity or ‘unreality’ of dominant discourses and hegemonic representations of history” (Langdon 2011, 2).

In that respect, I argue that *God Help the Child* is a case in point. Morrison’s clever use of enchantment in the novel fulfills the purpose of subverting the narratives of a “post-racial America” (Gras 2016, 1), whereby systemic structures of racism are believed to be a thing of the past, especially considering the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States in 2009. In dispelling this myth, the author engages a host of traumatic realities that she has made her lifelong mission to retrieve from oblivion, protect from the white esthetic and cultural supremacy, and hand down to future generations.

More precisely, the uncanny metamorphosis that characterizes the novel’s protagonist, a Black beauty named Lula Ann/Bride - who is made to suffer a systematic disintegration of her much-admired body - can be construed as a metaphorical reflection of Morrison’s conception of racial trauma as “the severe fragmentation of the self” (Morrison 1989, 16). Indeed, this phenomenon forces the main character to come to terms with harrowing experiences of discrimination, misogyny, and abuse, which she has desperately tried to put behind her throughout her life.

### 3 Enchantment and *God Help the Child*

The dimension of enchantment in the novel opens with the protagonist's first remarkable bodily change. A few hours after her birth, Sweetness, her mother, notices the newborn's surprisingly dark skin color, for which she significantly denies blame: "It's not my fault. So you can't blame me" (Morrison 2016, 3). Yet, what might initially appear as the physiological emergence of recessive genes in the infant turns out to be an actual metamorphosis, which sees the baby turn blue-black right before her mother's eyes (Morrison 2016, 4-5). The reason behind this transformation is never addressed, thus proving it to be the very first of a series of changes that remain unexplained throughout the story. Thanks to Morrison's apt use of enchantment, these circumstances are presented in the novel as upsetting but not extraordinary, an oscillation between the realms of the real and the fantastic which, I argue, cleverly alerts the readers to the insidious dynamics of the transgenerational transmission of racial prejudices, all the while underlying the sad "ordinariness" of such situations in the existences of minoritarian subjects. In this case, Morrison tackles discriminatory prejudices that are held not only by the non-Blacks, but also by the African American community itself, especially skin color, "an important factor" by which the Blacks "measure themselves" (Jovovič 2019, 202). This phenomenon, commonly called colorism, by which "lighter skin tones, straight hair" [...] and more "Eurocentric facial features" are constantly preferred over "more stereotypically Afrocentric facial features" (Russell, Wilson, Hall 1992, 43), has taken on "a deeply structural character" and "persists across generations" (Monk 2021, 77) of African Americans.

As López Ramirez observes, the "internalization of negative racial stereotypes and images" damages relations within the Black community, as it "generates micro-aggressions" often causing serious emotional damage, a phenomenon that becomes "especially dramatic in childhood" (López Ramirez 2016, 180). In that respect, Sweetness is a case in point: her grandmother had such a light skin that she decided to pass for white, choosing assimilation into the white world over her own family. Upon becoming a mother herself, Sweetness fails to offer her daughter the support and affection that every child needs, since "she transfers the contempt she feels for her own race to her child" (López Ramirez 2016, 160). Indeed, the shock of the newborn's blue-black skin causes Sweetness to go "crazy for just a minute", to the point that "she held a blanket over her face and pressed"; eventually, she realized she "couldn't do that, no matter how much" she "wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color". She even thought of "giving her away to an orphanage someplace" but she was "scared to be one of those mothers who put their babies on church steps" (Morrison 2016, 5). The girl's color also turned out to be the

main reason for the dissolution of her marriage to Louis, Bride's father, and for his ensuing desertion of the family. The man, in fact, is so outraged at the sight of the newborn that he treats her as "the non-human Other" (Gallego 2019, 307), i.e., in Morrison's terms, as if "she was a stranger - more than that, an enemy" (Morrison 2016, 5), and refuses to recognize her as his own, suspecting, instead, his wife's infidelity. Yet, while he, eventually, leaves without ever even having touched Lula Ann, her mother, in turn, stays, only to raise her without the slightest human - let alone motherly - warmth (Morrison 2016, 31). The woman's fear of society's inveterate racism runs so deep that she even tries to hide the fact that Lula is her own daughter (Morrison 2016, 6).

The pain of her father's desertion and of her mother's neglectful parenting style inflicts an "insidious trauma" (Brown 1995, 107) on the little girl, a psychic wound that she desperately tries to heal by repudiating her mother and fleeing her unhappy home in the attempt to build a better future for herself. Growing up, she blossoms into a strikingly beautiful woman - with her old "stigma" (Keita 2018, 51), her blue-black skin tone, eventually turning into her strong point - and becomes the founder and poster girl of a successful cosmetic line. As her designer friend Jeri tells her - thereby sanctioning the hegemony of a white-centered aesthetic paradigm that gives value to Blackness only for commercial and material reasons - "Black sells [...] [it] is the hottest commodity in the civilized world" (Morrison 2016, 36). Having changed her name from Lula Ann to the more fashionable Bride, she starts wearing "all white all the time" so that, following a process of sexist objectification and commodification of her body, the people who saw her would think of, in her designer friend's words, "something classy the likes of whipped cream and chocolate soufflé" (Morrison 2016, 33). Unlike most "emotionally abused children", who often "grow up believing that they are deficient in some way", she finds in a glamorous public and social life an opportunity for a highly coveted "vengeance from her tormenting childhood ghosts" (López Ramirez 2019, 153). Eventually, she fabricates a new self, a "thrillingly successful corporate woman façade of complete control" (Morrison 2016, 134) - the epitome of the entrepreneurial spirit that embodies "Obama's 'Yes, We Can' spirit of the new Black", a new subjectivity which, in the years 2010s when the novel is set, "reaffirms upward mobility and success, [...] the promise of the American dream" (Aktar 2019, 7).

A major turning point in her life is her encounter with Booker, a young man with whom she starts a passionate relationship. Unbeknownst to each other, they share a common past of "childhood trauma, and direct or indirect confrontations with accused child molesters" (Kakutani 2015). When Booker meets her, in fact, he is still "trying to comprehend the emotional levy exacted" by his older broth-

er Adam's death at the hands of a pedophile serial killer (Strawn 2015). As he sets his eyes on Bride, though, her extraordinary beauty seems to have a healing effect on his post-traumatic dysphoria, to the point of initiating "the disintegration of the haunt and gloom" in which "Adam's murder had clouded him" (Morrison 2016, 132).

Bride, in turn, feels safe enough with him as to share every "fear, every hurt, every accomplishment, however small" (Morrison 2016, 53). Indeed, she confesses to him that, when she was six years old, she witnessed the rape of a boy from her window at the hands of their then-landlord, Mr. Leigh. Having noticed her, the man, with palpable hatred and disgust, called her obscenities, among which was the N-word. Shocked and distressed, she turned to Sweetness for comfort and advice, but her mother went into a fury, instead. Not only did she hit her daughter, but she also ordered her not to report the incident, for fear of an eviction from their reasonably priced and safely located apartment. Thus, the hideous abuse went unpunished (Morrison 2016, 55-6). To Bride's initial relief, Booker's reaction to her disclosure is one of understanding and compassion. Yet, the emotional connection she establishes with him triggers the resurfacing of her long-repressed traumatic memories - which start coming up "fresh as though she was seeing them for the first time" (Morrison 2016, 53) - and the malignant consequences of her desperate search for love, recognition and approval. Among these is the horrific echo of another child molestation episode, a scandal that rocked her school when she was only eight years old. Succumbing to the pressure of her then-peers and, above all, to her wish to win her mother's attention, Lula Ann falsely testified against a teacher, Sofia Huxley, causing her to be convicted to serve a twenty-five-year long sentence as an innocent woman (Morrison 2016, 31)

Thinking back about the trial, Bride wonders whether, deep inside, it had been Mr. Leigh's "nastiness" or, rather, "the curse" (Morrison 2016, 56) he launched at her, to trigger her into levelling accusations at her teacher, perhaps as a desperate attempt at rectifying her previous error - probably, a trauma-induced instance of psychological displacement. While she keeps her guilty secret to herself, she lets Booker know that she intends to meet her former teacher in person the day of her release to comfort her with gifts and cash. Not being privy to the whole story, he perceives her plan as a pathological urge to "suck up" to "a monster" (Morrison 2016, 153), a misplaced "good Samaritan" (Morrison 2016, 12) attitude that brings back to surface his repressed memories of Adam's murder. Unable to control the upsurge of pain and rage, he breaks up with her with no explanation, except for the laconically cruel words "You not the woman I want". Booker's resolution is first narrated, from Bride's perspective, as an incomprehensible act: "I can't have thoughts of my own? Do things he doesn't approve of?" (Morrison 2016, 8). Having "counted on her

looks for so long" to open every door for her after the marginalization she experienced during her childhood, the rejection shatters her fragile sense of self-worth, while reinforcing her old fears of not being "enough" (Morrison 2016, 8). The separation causes Bride "to unravel both physically and emotionally" (Anrig 2015), to the point that she ends up feeling "dismissed" and "erased" (Morrison 2016, 38).

This crisis is figuratively expressed by Morrison once again through the clever use of enchantment, by having Bride undergo several more corporeal transformations, which, on a par with the metamorphosis she underwent as a newborn, are presented as disturbing but not explicitly supernatural phenomena. As she is getting ready to drive to Decagon Women's Correctional Center to pick up her former teacher, Bride notes that "every bit" of her pubic hair is no longer there. Not "as in shaved or waxed, but gone as in erased, as in never having been there in the first place" (Morrison 2016, 12-13). This uncanny incident does not divert Bride from her incredibly shallow self-redeeming initiative, a tell-tale sign of her emotional naiveté which understandably backfires as soon as Sofia Huxley learns about the identity of her unexpected visitor. After her initial shock, Sofia attacks Bride with such a violence as to land her in hospital in need of facial reconstructive surgery. Bride's regression gradually extends to her armpits, where, as she finds out, there is no longer any hair left. To her utmost surprise, she then realizes that also her earlobes have gone back to her childhood, before she had them pierced as a gift from Sweetness for testifying against her teacher (Morrison 2016, 50). Bride's metamorphosis continues with her astonishing realization that "her magnificent breasts" are gone; "her chest" is "flat. Completely flat, with only the nipples to prove" it is "not her back" (Morrison 2016, 92).

Not being mature enough to understand that it was her repression of the past that drove Booker away, Bride resolves to track him down and confront him, "which was the same as confronting herself" (Morrison 2016, 98) to demand an explanation. As she sets out on a quest to find him, she is involved in a car accident which almost costs her life, leaving her with multiple injuries. Trapped in her wrecked Jaguar, she is rescued by a middle-aged hippie couple, who takes her in for a fortnight of convalescence. It is in their humble dwelling in the middle of nowhere, a world away from her glittering Californian milieu, that Bride's enchanted transformation culminates with a regression to the size of a young girl, an occurrence of which she becomes aware when the top of her fashionable outfit sags "as if instead of a size 2 she had purchased a 4 and just now noticed the difference" (Morrison 2016, 81).

As Bride's much-admired body ultimately returns to the shape of a preteen - a phenomenon that becomes naturalized to the point that nobody else, not even the doctors who treat her injuries, seems



to have noticed – she is ready to reconnect with her innermost self – “that scared little black girl” (Morrison 2016, 142) who, in her distorted perception, never deserved to be loved. It is then that she befriends Rain – her hosts’ adopted daughter, a child that the couple rescued from the streets in Asia. Notably, her actual age is not known, as the girl’s physical development arrested at prepubescence, probably as a traumatic consequence of protracted sexual abuse. Thanks to Morrison’s use of enchantment, Bride and Rain are – figuratively speaking, at least – roughly the same age, both emotionally and physically, due to their shared past of childhood abuse. In this light, it is no wonder that together they experience “a companionship” which, rather unusually for Bride’s competitive and superficial social circle, is “surprisingly free of envy. Like the closeness of schoolgirls” (Morrison 2016, 103). What is more, when Rain is threatened by local bullies with a bird-shooting gun pointed at her, Bride does not hesitate to risk her life and take a bullet for her. With this supremely selfless act, an evolution from the “identity of an abused child” toward the role of “maternal protector and nurturer of an abused child” (Wyatt 2017, 29) the last layer of her meticulously constructed self – in Morrison’s words, the “shield” of vanity, self-absorption, and cynicism that has protected “her from any overly intense feeling” (Morrison 2016, 79) – is symbolically stripped down. Her regression, in fact ends, – “there were no more physical disappearances” (142) – and her psychological healing begins.

Bride’s path to “self-forgiveness and self-definition” (Scholes 2015), receives her victim’s blessing – if not in person, certainly in spirit. Sofia Huxley, in fact, realizes that with her apparently reckless initiative, “that black girl” did her “a favor”: the minute she threw Bride out, she was finally able to cry. Her violent outburst, in fact, triggered the release “of tears unshed for fifteen years” (Morrison 2016, 70). Having finally been cured of her “inability to mourn the damage that was inflicted on her” (Wagner-Martin 2015, 250), Sofia is ready to forgive and move on with her life, by metaphorically putting Bride “back together, healing her, thanking her. For the release” (Morrison 2016, 77). It is then, and only then, that Bride feels ready to finally confront Booker. Upon meeting him after their abrupt separation, they start to fight and, as he vehemently demands to know why she paid homage to a convicted child molester, she eventually finds the strength to put words to her childhood trauma and let him in on her darkest secret. Having shaken off her traumatic burden, Bride’s physique progressively regains its past splendor, and her metamorphosis comes full circle as she announces her pregnancy to Booker (Morrison 2016, 174-5).

## 4 Conclusion

It is my contention that the enchanted dimension in the novel cleverly counters the myth of a post-racial society in 21st-century America, by proving that the racial order continues to play a major role in the social and political structure of the country. Thanks to the protagonist's ordeal, in fact, Morrison forces her readers to confront not only the corrosive and persistent presence of racism in contemporary American life, but also the malignant transgenerational reverberations of traumatic experiences of discrimination, oppression and abuse. The magical physical transformations and multiple injuries that Bride must suffer during her "literal and metaphorical" journey (Scholes 2015) towards psychological freedom symbolize the urgency to reconnect with repressed psychic wounds, a painful but indispensable step towards breaking the chain of trauma that has deeply affected so many lives in the story. With this newly acquired awareness, Bride can look forward to the prospective arrival of a new generation with faith and hope that the past will not repeat itself.

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