

# “What You Do to Children Matters”: A Psychoanalytic Reading of *God Help the Child*

**Feng Mei**

China West Normal University, Nanchong, 637000, China

Email: [1032154627@qq.com](mailto:1032154627@qq.com)

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**Abstract:**

*God Help the Child*, the eleventh novel of the great American woman writer, the Nobel Prize winner, Tony Morrison, showing readers the realistic social problems in contemporary America. Moreover, the author shows her deep humanistic concern for children's growth and the simple but complicated relationship between child and parents. This paper, under the guidance of psychoanalytic theory, the classical one, analyzes the daily lives of our protagonists, Bride, as well as her lover, Booker, tries to reveal the unrealized psychological problems of them and how these problems manipulated their personal life, hoping that this paper could provide us a better understanding of the characters and also the novel.

**Keywords:** *God Help the Child*; children; psychoanalytic reading

In this novel, *God Help the Child*, Toni Morrison deals more directly than any of her other novels with the relationship between child and parents, individual and society, especially the intimate relationship of colored man and woman with painful childhood in the twenty-first century. There are many different aspects worth exploring in this wonderful novel, we may have different understanding if we read the novel from a totally different view point. In this paper, under the guidance of psychoanalytic theory, the classical psychoanalysis, we might attend mainly to the work's representation of family dynamics in general to see the ways in which unsettled conflicts about our roles within the family are "played out" and "passed down" to our children, and how it influenced the future life for children. Whether we realize it or not, psychoanalytic concepts have become part of our everyday lives, and in this novel, by telling us the everyday lives of those characters, full or flat, the novel also provided us a great chance to appreciate the inner world of those characters. The whole novel was consisted of the dialogues and interior monologues of the characters, besides, the story was told by each character from a different point of view, and all these pieces compose the whole story. There are various families in this novel, unfortunately, none of them is happy, and even it is hard to be called a family. Children of those family are tormented mentally or spiritually, what's more, different family conflicts are displayed in front of us, those conflicts may also appeared in our own life, so when we try to analyze the behaviors of those literary characters from the psychological perspective that may offer us a great chance to find our unrealized psychological problem.

The family is very important in psychoanalytic theory because we are each a product of the role we are given in the family-complex. In one sense, the "birth" of the unconscious lies in the way we perceive our place in the family and how we react to this self-definition. The girls in this novel none of them has a happy family, and all of them were abused by the family members, both physically and mentally. Some already grow up, and one is still a little girl, but brutally tormented. And we will trace the childhood sufferings of these girl, Bride, Sofia and Rain, and how these sufferings troubled their life. When Lula Ann was born, only after one hour that her mother found her birth was an immense mistake. She tried to smother the little baby, and in the later life she treated Lula Ann very harshly. Lula Ann didn't have a family, her father left them because of her dark skin, and she was never allowed to call her mother "mom" "mummy" or something like that, in other words, she was free of family ties. The novel didn't tell us much about Sofia's childhood, but from what she suffered at present we can get some clue of her past. During the fifteen years when she was in the jail, her parents never write or visited her, her mother's strict treatment helped her to spend her term of imprisonment. Comparing with Bride, Rain was much miserable than her. Without knowing who her father is, and she was forced to sell her body to any man at her mother's wish, and she was kicked out of the house by her mother who only threw her a sweater. They are both suffered a lot from the family conflicts and psychological wounds. After the moment when the two girls were delivered to the world, they felt the harsh treatment of their family. One grew up and became successful, the other was saved by a kind couple, but all their behavior reflected what they have experienced. Comparing with those girls, one of our protagonist, Booker once had a happy family, his parents loved and cared them, but things changed after his elder brother Adam's murder, the happy family never came back, also, he was drove

out of the house by his father for his disagreement of his family members.

When we look at the world through a psychoanalytic lens, we see that it is comprised of individual human beings, each with a psychological history that begins in childhood experiences in the family and each with patterns of adolescent and adult behavior that are the direct result of that early experience[1]. The color discrimination of the society, and the unfair treatment of black people were deeply printed on the heart of her parents, born so black, that her parents deprived Lula Ann of any dignity or care, no more than one hour after her birth, her mother realized something was wrong, really wrong, with a lighter skin, her baby couldn't be that dark. Lula Ann's mother tried to find out why it happened, but the novel didn't really give any reason of it. Her mother's telling just let us readers know how harsh and miserable would life be with a dark skin. Things even got worse, when Lula Ann's father saw her, he said, "Goddamn! What the hell is this?"[2] Her father never touched her, and then left. When Lula Ann was a little girl, she didn't feel the love and care from her father, maybe it is safe to say that she didn't know much about her father. In the family, father plays a vital role, and the absence of father may cause a big psychological problem in the whole life of the child, and it may take a long time even the whole life to recover.

From a little girl to an achieved business woman, Sweetness was very strict with her, she needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble. When she got her first period, her mother slapped her and then pushed her into a tub of cold water. When she tried to tell Sweetness what she had seen the landlord do some dirty things to a little boy, Sweetness was furious and told her not to say a word about it. Even Sweetness stopped her from tattling on the dog. The things that Sweetness had down to her never been erased from her head, Bride always wanted to tell, but nobody listened, and she didn't have a chance to ask any question, so when she grew up, she didn't pry into the life of others, even the man she loved.

When Bride was in love with Booker, even after they have lived together for six months, she didn't know much about him. "Finding these books prove how little I know about him, that he was somebody else, somebody thinking things he never talked about." [3] She spilled her guts to him, told him everything, but she never poked her nose into Booker's privacy. When Booker left her without a word, she went to Queen's house to find Booker, the only thing Bride knew about Booker is good sex. It may be odd for lovers who don't share their life and show no interest in each other. When we try to analyze this from a psychological perspective, things may be easier for us to understand. Bride, she wasn't aware of that she was still longing for the love she never got from her long lost father. She didn't know much about her father and meanwhile she didn't know much about Booker. She sought a mate who she knew little, unconsciously hoping to fulfill whatever psychological needs were left unfulfilled by her father.

Obviously, Bride and others' relationship lacks intimacy too, her ex-boyfriends were not good enough for her, those guy were just waiting for her crotch or her paycheck like an allowance. Seeing from the contemporary standards, twenty-three-year-old Bride is immensely successful. She drove a Jaguar, basked in a material lifestyle, and occupied an influential role at the company. The material life is so affluent, but the spirit life is so scanty. She didn't keep an intimate relationship with her

ex-boyfriends, but she is still longing for love and being loved. Bride is afraid of abandonment so she refused to keep an intimate relationship with others, her ex-boyfriends, Booker, Brooklyn, and her mother Sweetness. The childhood cuts caused those problems but she didn't know it, perhaps she tried to repress it, but still she needs some way to let it out unconsciously. She never told others that once she accused an innocent white teacher to gain her mother's touch, but she still needed to confess the guilty things she had done, let the repressed feeling heard by others. Eventually, she met Booker Starbern, her lover, listened attentively to the things she told him about her childhood when they were together. After Booker's leaving, she fall apart and descended into infantile insecurity.

Bride's low self-esteem, like her fear of intimacy and insecurity, is also indicated in large part by her relationship with Booker. She was a rich career girl, everything was perfect except her childhood. Also, she was proud of herself, but things changed after Booker's leaving with the words "you not the woman i wanted." She thought her life was falling down, and she was miserable. The absence of father and love of mother made her especially vulnerable to the influence of her lover's leaving. Bride didn't know why Booker left her, and began to doubt herself. So when Booker left without telling her why she became depressed and anxious, all her successful life turned into misfortune, and she wasn't the beautiful black lady, but the helpless black young girl, just as she didn't know what she should do in Sweetness's room. Falling so much in love with a man who was not come to her suggests an unconscious belief that she doesn't deserve better. Comparing herself to Booker, they two didn't match each other. After argue with his sister, Booker left his own family, later homeless, so he bunked at his ex-girlfriend's apartment. After his graduation, he didn't get a decent job. In a word, Booker was nothing but beautiful, but Bride still cherished him so deeply. That is to say, Bride didn't realize that Booker was the unworthy man, or she refused to see it, if she told herself Booker was not good enough for her, that was to tell herself a successful black girl with a guilty secret didn't deserve better.

Booker's fear of intimacy, just like Bride's, was more difficult to perceive. The first time Booker met Bride was bewitched by her beauty. All these wonderful words were used to describe how he was impressed by her just on the first sight. And he incurably fall in love with her. He thought their love affair was perfect, everything was wonderful. Especially he loved Bride's lack of his personal life. That is to say, Booker loved the luxurious life Bride provided for him, enjoyed the companion of her, but he didn't want Bride to ask too much about his personal life. Bride was perfect in every way, especially Bride wasn't interested in his private affairs, so for Booker a woman like Bride was perfect for him. He can keep emotionally safe, he wouldn't have to fear his repressed guilty and wounds would be spied by others. In psychoanalytic terms, a man who is fond of a woman suffering from severe fear of intimacy probably fears intimacy himself. So many years have gone by, he still can't get out of the shadow of his brother's death, the death wasn't his brother only, when the day of Adam's death, he also felt the death of himself, and he was afraid that others would find it. And also others would find that, he wanted to control the family or the others by the sadness feeling of his brother's death. He fears intimacy, he fears the guilty mind, and he fears himself, so nothing can make him feel safer than a woman who has no desire for him. Upon learning that Bride's interest did not focus exclusively on him, such a woman would have become very capable of loving him intensely because

she posed no threat to his protective shell: he wouldn't have wanted to break through it even if he could have. And when Booker find Bride was trying to help the woman he resented, he change his attitude and ran away to protect his shell wouldn't be badly hurt.

In the psychological world, fear of intimacy with others is usually a product of fear of intimacy with oneself. Because close interpersonal relationships dredge up the psychological residue of earlier family conflicts and bring into play aspects of our identity we don't want to deal with or even know about, the best way to avoid painful psychological self-awareness is to avoid close interpersonal relationships, especially romantic relationships. Booker didn't want others to judge his family, and he didn't want others know that he tried to use Adam's death to win a place in his family, and also he is afraid of admitting such a dark side of himself. But why not just simply avoid love affairs altogether, that arbitrary practice may make sense for some people who fear intimacy, the psychological wounds responsible for that fear usually demand a stage on which to reenact, in disguised form, the original wounding experience, and a romantic relationship provides an excellent stage. So Bride was perfect for him, Bride was busy with her work, she didn't need his company all the time, and her attention was not merely on him, so he knew that it would be safe to stay with Bride. In such a relationship, he could enjoy what he wanted in a safe distance, and the six months he spent with Bride was such an excellent stage for him.

Booker's fear of intimacy wasn't limited to his relationship with Bride was suggested by his earlier love affair. When he got his master degree, "Booker traveled home alone for the celebratory dinner his mother had arranged".[4] He didn't ask Felicity to accompany him, for he didn't want others judge his family, for him, family wasn't a warm and a cosy home where they can share their joy and sadness without hesitation, but a cold place with indifferent ones. He didn't want others to know what once happened in his family, even his girlfriend. Their relationship lasted for two years primarily because they two didn't spend much time together, so Felicity didn't have a chance to inquiry his personal life, not to mention the part he refused to unveil it to others--his family. But their sweet love didn't keep stable for a long time until they two spent every day together without any break, but "by the end of summer the relationship with Felicity had frayed beyond any stitched-up remedy"[5]. They were both unpleasant and annoying with each other, the more they get to know one another, the more they disliked one another, Felicity regarded him as a misogynist loser. Their relationship ended after Booker's arrest and the night he spent in a holding cell, Booker didn't tell Felicity why he would beat that couple and help the baby, and he wouldn't say any word about it. He was afraid of telling others about his beloved brother's death and why he can't let Adam's death go by, and back to his own life without Adam. In other words, when the affair became somewhat serious, he dropped her, again in the manner most likely to avoid an emotional scene. In his relationships with women, Booker is a master of avoidance and denial.

Bride was treated badly just because of her dark skin, the skin was a cross that she would always carry. Booker was afflicted by the death of his brother. They both buried some secret in the bottom of their heart, and don't want to be perceived by others. What we have suffered when we were kids may never be erased from our life. Her mother, Sweetness, always told readers that she treated Lula Ann so

badly just to protect her, but Bride was too young to understand. Bride changed her name from Lula Ann Bridewell to just Bride when she was sixteen, and seldom visited her Sweetness when she grew up. When she grew up, the things she did were deeply influenced by what she experienced when she was a little girl, she thought she could get ride of the shadow of past, but she didn't. Booker left his home, and may never return. Both of them suffered a lot form their childhood. And when we try to analyze her behaviors from the psychoanalytic perspective we may have a better understanding of those we couldn't understand of our protagonist. What we are today and how we react to the world keeps an intimate relationship with our past. As Bride's Sweetness said: "What you have done to children matters, and they might never forgot." [6]

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