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The Gothic and Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*

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Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos Anglo-Americanos, orientada pelo
Professor Doutor Carlos Azevedo.

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

25 de Setembro de 2020

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Porto, 25 de Setembro de 2020
Alexandra Maria de Vasconcellos Conde Gagean

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the influence of the Gothic and grotesque elements in Toni Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, and how the author uses them as devices to expose the tribulations of being African American in the United States.

By establishing the origins and some defining aspects of the grotesque and the Gothic, as well as some of its subgenres, and their evolution in America, we begin to delineate how the two novels are inserted in an African American tradition of appropriating the Gothic to write about the violence against Black people in America. To do so, we majorly focus on the works of scholars such as Maisha Wester and Wolfgang Kayser, which are crucial to help us contextualize each novel as a modern example of Gothic and grotesque conventions.

Drawing from this, the first chapter focuses on *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and how the novel uses Gothic tropes to represent the effects of racism on African Americans, while simultaneously critiquing white hegemony and those who abide by it. The chapter is divided into three parts; the first part analyses the Breedloves and the haunting consequences of trauma and abuse in African American families. On a second part, we look into the dangers of internalised racism and how white society constitutes a very real peril for Blacks in America. Finally, we discuss the character of Pecola Breedlove and how her perceived grotesqueness and inevitable descent into madness are products of insidious and unrealistic beauty standards.

In the second chapter we examine *Song of Solomon* (1977) with a focus on patriarchal tyranny and the African tradition of being connected with the spiritual and the supernatural, by discussing the Dead family, memory and the past, and Pilate Dead. In the chapter's first instance we delve into the oppressive origins of the novel's hero, moving on, in the second part, to consider ghosts and ancestry as essential in Milkman's journey of self-discovery. In the third and final part we analyse the supernatural character of Pilate Dead, the novel's griot.

Keywords: Gothic, grotesque, African American, Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*

Resumo

Esta dissertação explora a influência de elementos do Gótico e do grotesco nos romances de Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* e *Song of Solomon*, e como a autora os usa como maneira de expor as tribulações de se ser Afro Americano nos Estados Unidos da América.

Ao estabelecer as origens e alguns aspetos que definem o grotesco e o Gótico, assim como os seus subgéneros, e a sua evolução na América, começamos por delinear como é que os dois romances se inserem na tradição Afro Americana de apropriar o Gótico para escrever sobre a violência contra os Negros na América. Para o fazer, focamo-nos nos trabalhos de críticos como Maisha Wester e Wolfgang Kayser, que são cruciais para a contextualização de cada romance como exemplo moderno das convenções Góticas e grotescas.

Assim, o primeiro capítulo foca-se em *The Bluest Eye* (1970), e em como o romance usa emblemas do Gótico para representar os efeitos do racismo em Afro Americanos, enquanto que simultaneamente critica a hegemonia branca e aqueles que se submetem à mesma. O capítulo divide-se em três partes; a primeira parte analisa os Breedlove e as consequências assombrosas do trauma e abuso nas famílias Afro Americanas. Numa segunda parte, olhamos para os riscos do racismo interiorizado, e como a sociedade branca representa um perigo muito real para os Negros na América. Finalmente, discutimos a personagem de Pecola Breedlove e como as suas características que são consideradas grotescas e a sua inevitável insanidade são produtos de padrões de beleza insidiosos e irrealistas.

No segundo capítulo examinamos *Song of Solomon* (1977) com um foco na tirania patriarcal e na tradição Africana de conexão com o espiritual e o sobrenatural, discutindo a família Dead, memória e passado, e a Pilate Dead. Numa primeira instância analisamos as origens opressivas do herói do romance, passando para, na segunda parte, uma consideração dos fantasmas e da ancestralidade como essenciais na viagem de autodescoberta de Milkman.

Na terceira e última parte analisamos a personagem sobrenatural que é Pilate Dead, a guardiã da família e do espiritual no romance.

List of Abbreviations

When citing the two Toni Morrison novels discussed in this dissertation, I will be using the following abbreviations:

TBE – *The Bluest Eye*

SoS – *Song of Solomon*

The full references to the editions cited can be found in the main bibliography.

Introduction

*For the dim regions whence my fathers came
My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs.
Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;
My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.
I would go back to darkness and to peace,
But the great western world holds me in fee,
And I may never hope for full release
While to its alien gods I bend my knee.
Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,
And I must walk the way of life a ghost
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart;
For I was born, far from my native clime,
Under the white man's menace, out of time.
- Claude McKay, "Outcast"*

In a 1985 interview with Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson, Toni Morrison offers an explanation as to why she writes elements of the grotesque into her work and the lives of her characters, describing that her goal is “to see really and truly of what these people are made, and I put them in situations of great duress and pain (...) And some of the situations are grotesque. These are not your normal everyday lives. They are not my normal every day life, probably not many people's.” (Morrison and Taylor-Guthrie 180). And indeed, in all of her novels Morrison puts her characters in situations that are traumatic, pushes them to their limit, in her words, to separate the remarkable from the normal. At the same time, Morrison’s protagonists often have some kind of physical or mental deformity that sets them aside from the community that they are inserted in, and turn them into outcasts. In this way, it can be inferred that the grotesque is present in Morrison’s novels as a product of a society that is suffering spiritually and morally, which in turn affects the characters. I also argue that, hand in hand with elements of the grotesque, it is possible to identify in Toni Morrison’s fiction influences of the gothic literary tradition. As such, I will attempt to delineate the presence of the gothic and of grotesque tropes in Toni Morrison’s fiction. Notwithstanding that *Beloved* (1987) is widely regarded as Morrison’s greatest work of Gothic fiction, for my

dissertation I chose to focus on *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) because I believe that both have elements of the Grotesque and the Gothic, and also, in a way, follow in slave writers' footsteps by subverting some traditional tropes, undermining the authority of white Gothic writers, in order to illustrate the realities of being black in a predominantly white American society. Thus, throughout my dissertation, I will further examine the elements that are relevant in each novel, and that I consider essential in delineating my work.

Originally derived from the Italian word for cave, *grotte*, the grotesque in its initial usage was used to describe a type of decorative ornamentation, which stemmed from the ornate frescos of Roman ruins which, filled with centuries of soil, began resembling caves. Later, the term was used for paintings which depicted the mingling of humans, animals and nature. It is believed to have been first used in a literary context in the 18th century, to designate the unnatural and the freakish (Cuddon 317) and in Germany its usage referred to a combination of human and non-human elements. This ornamental style was, according to Wolfgang Kayser, a kind of re-architecture, because no one before had thought of using nature in building, and it was similarly unthought of to have stems as columns, or bodies growing out of roots. When designing the pillars for the Papal Loggias in 1515, Raphael adopted the use of the contrast between this abstract ornamental style paired with objects from the familiar world, thus, in a way, subverting the natural order of things. During the Renaissance, the grotesque took to signifying the face of a world that was different from our own, with ominous and sinister connotations, where laws did not exist, and the natural world was indistinguishable from the inanimate. It was in Europe, more specifically Germany, in the 16th century that the grotesque was used in art as an adjective to refer to "the monstrous fusion of human and nonhuman elements as the most typical feature of the grotesque style" (Kayser 24) Indeed, the grotesque began to signify in Europe the out of the ordinary, the bizarre, the extravagant and the fantastic. It was in the 17th century that François Rabelais used the term

grotesque to write about the human body, and thus, one can pinpoint this as the first moment when the grotesque was used in a literary context. It wasn't until a century later that the term in literature expanded to Germany and England, here encompassing more meanings than just the deformed and horrible, to house qualities of the funny and ridiculous, and even being associated with caricatures. This was mainly adopted by German writers, who used the grotesque as a device to write about comic and bizarre situations. In his work, Kayser points out that one of the characteristics of the grotesque in literature is the lack of a structure, novels do not follow the traditional timeline of beginning, middle and end, but rather the narrative is written in independent and self-contained scenes.

In America, the grotesque was often present in the gothic novels of authors such as Edgar Allan Poe. Poe, according to Morrison, was the American author that gave rise to the concept of African-Americanism (Morrison 1992:18), and Eric Savoy agrees with Morrison, when he writes that although Poe's works do not directly mention slavery or all the horrors inherent to it,

several of his most celebrated texts are rightly understood now as profound meditations upon the cultural significance of "blackness" in the white American mind. A surprising amount of Poe's work may be said to Gothicize the deep oppression and violence inherent in his culture's whiteness and thus to transform America's normative race into the most monstrous of them all. (Savoy 182)

However, the grotesque in American Literature became more commonly associated with the Southern Gothic, a subgenre that is notable for characters who suffer from disabilities, and thus become social outcasts. There have been many attempts to define the grotesque in literature, but the most comprehensive and regarded study of this literary style is Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, where he argues that "The alienation of familiar forms creates that mysterious and terrifying connection between the fantastic and the real world which is so essential for the grotesque." (Kayser 122) In a similar way to Morrison's justification in the above quoted interview about her usage

of the grotesque in her novels, scholar Philip Thomson defends that although the grotesque is indeed connected to the fantastic, it only produces the reaction of subversion in the reader because it is presented to them in a realistic world. Thomson states that:

If 'fantastic' means simply a pronounced divergence from the normal and natural then the grotesque is undoubtedly fantastic. But if, as we surely must, we insist that the criterion be whether the material is presented in a fantastic, or realistic way, then we are more likely to conclude that, far from possessing an affinity with the fantastic, it is precisely the conviction that the grotesque world, however strange, is yet our world, real and immediate, which makes the grotesque so powerful. (Thomson 21)

Kayser's study of the grotesque agrees with this, in that it states that the grotesque is not related to a fantastic world, but rather the reader is able to sense a state of alienation, while being aware that this grotesque world is connected to our own (Kayser 181) And indeed, the grotesque in Morrison's works is inserted in a seemingly normal society. The background for the two novels in analysis in this dissertation is the city, not some fantastic imagined world, but the real world, and it is in this real world that the characters are victims of trauma, ostracized, and deemed to be "freaks". The reason the grotesque of Morrison's novels affects us so much as readers is because we can identify the world of the novels as our own world. At the same time, the grotesque seems so fantastic to a reader because it is not something that is necessarily familiar to them. As Kayser puts it, the grotesque novel is grotesque because it alienates the familiar to the reader

The apparently meaningful things are shown to have no meaning, and familiar objects begin to look strange. The author intends to shake the reader's confidence in his world view by depriving him of the safeguards provided by tradition and society. (Kayser 61)

This is further asserted by Flannery O'Connor, one of the key figures of the grotesque tradition, in her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction", where she writes "In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life." However, she also grants that "the characters have an inner coherence, if not

always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected.” (O’Connor 815)

This leads us to Thomson’s considerations that one of the main characteristics of the grotesque is its disharmony, it depends on conflict and it can be the “expression of a profound sense of dislocation and alienation” (Thomson 18) Similarly, other critics pose that the grotesque as a literary style depicts the flaws of human nature and psyche, by being a representation of a clash between two opposing forces. The characters of Toni Morrison’s novels are often at a conflict with their surroundings, and that violence, physical and emotional, is frequently present in her writings. Furthermore, characters that are seen as different or abnormal from what is acceptable in society are often alienated, almost always by their own community. This disintegration of the order within a social group that is spatially unified, as well as its estrangement from the whole city is also, according to Kayser, another quality of the grotesque as a literary style. (Kayser 67) In *The Bluest Eye* Pecola descends into insanity because she is constantly told by the people around her that she is ugly, not worthy of attention or love, a freak. And it is this destructive belief that her appearance has grotesque qualities, imposed on her by her community, that will effectively turn her into something grotesque, driving her into madness and the cave of her own mind, with her imaginary friend. This encounter with madness too, Kayser posits, is a basic experience of the grotesque that life forces on us. In opposition, we have Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, whose lack of navel turns her into an outcast from society, as she is believed to be of supernatural origins. However, she uses ostracism as a weapon, to own herself and be free of societal constraints. And this supernatural element, Thomson argues, the realm of the uncanny, is also essential for the terrifying quality of the grotesque. (Thomson 20)

In the same interview with Jones and Vinson, Toni Morrison adds that the history of the African American people also plays a part in the way she is attracted to writing about extraordinary individuals, and why the grotesque is a part of her work, explaining that

our existence here, has been grotesque. It really has. The fact that we are a stable people making an enormous contribution in whatever way to the society is remarkable because all you have to do is scratch the surface, I don't mean us as individuals but as a race, and there is something quite astonishing there and that's what peaks my curiosity. (Morrison and Taylor-Guthrie 181)

This converges with the appropriation of the gothic genre by African American writers, and especially slave writers. The monster in the gothic novel was often associated with darkness, otherness which represented all the evils that whites feared at the time. According to Morrison, this happened because:

There was a resident population, already black, upon which the imagination could play; through which historical, moral, metaphysical, and social dears, problems, and dichotomies could be articulated. The slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness. This black population was available for meditations on terror. (Morrison 1992: 37)

In this work of literary criticism, Morrison also introduces the idea of the “not-free” “not-me”, with the only thing that differentiates these two concepts being skin colour and status of enslavement. What this American-Africanism provided, she argues, was material for the imagination of American authors to thrive, by projecting every dark fear that they felt internally, about themselves, onto an Other, the black slave. (Morrison 1992: 38) Maisha Wester’s analysis of slave narratives seems to agree with Morrison, when she writes that “Nineteenth-century pro-slavery texts and newspapers often used gothic tropes to discuss slave rebellion, cultivating a terror of the unrestrained black body.” (Wester 2016: 245) in what was a blatant example of a projection of the anxieties that white masters felt at not being secure of their dominion over their slaves. The Other, then, is a monstrous body that is allowed to act out the deviances that the white society condemns but feels within themselves. In other words, as Wester eloquently puts it “The American Gothic establishes a distance—imagined through

notions of the geographical frontier— between the self and the Other.” (Wester 2012: 4) This is further supported by Adam Lloyd-Smith, who argues that the unusual relationship between blacks and whites in America, which derived from the American society’s peculiar dependence on slavery, “gave yet another twist to the development of American Gothic. The ‘power of blackness’... was also, as Toni Morrison has argued, a power of definition of the ‘other’, the resident non-American whose abjection supported the self-definition of the dominant whites.” (Lloyd-Smith 110)

As a response, African Americans decided to appropriate the gothic genre for themselves, in an attempt to use these same tropes to write about the terrors and realities of being black in America. This was first attempted by the slave writers, who saw the horrible ways in which they were being portrayed as in literature, and wanted to denounce the real horror that was being inflicted in America, slavery:

The use of the Gothic by former slaves was a complex manipulation. The genre, given to using blackness to signify moral degeneration and consequently depicting the monstrous and fiendish as ‘black,’ inherently coded the black body as inhuman and inferior. Ex-slaves used the genre to argue for their innate humanity and to portray the warping effects of slavery as an institution. Slave narratives functioned as a form of resistance (Wester 2016: 250)

While the Gothic is often associated with the supernatural and the uncanny, it also often has elements of murder, torture and rape, all of which are also part of the narrative and history of slavery. In this way, African American Gothic can be said to resemble the Southern Gothic by representing a community that is haunted by its history. As such,

the gothic trope proves particularly useful for black writers in reimagining history and identity (...) while the genre proves a likewise capable means for these writers to contest and deconstruct such inscribed identities and histories. (Wester 2012: 29)

Notably, the most Gothic of Toni Morrison’s novels is *Beloved* (1987). In it Sethe, a former slave, lives with her daughter Denver and their dog at 124 Bluestone Road, a house that is haunted by Sethe’s murdered baby daughter. After being driven away by Sethe’s lover, Paul D., the spirit returns to the house embodied by a young woman named Beloved, who has a

supernatural influence over the inhabitants of number 124. Apart from its supernatural elements, *Beloved* is charged with violent tales of slavery, and the way it affects its victims, not only physically but also, and most notoriously, mentally. As Julia Briggs puts it, in this novel Toni Morrison appropriates the tropes of the ghost story to write about the dark and violent narratives of slavery. (Briggs 130) It is slavery then, that becomes the main source of the monstrosity present in the text, represented by the ghost of Beloved. Slavery is something that the characters cannot get rid of, and is ever present in their lives, even though they are, technically, freed from it. As Wester puts it “*Beloved* illustrates that the psychological shift from “beast” to “(hu)man” was extremely difficult as blacks continue(d) to view each other and their relationships through the oppressive lens of dominant white society”. (Wester 2012: 187) Thus, it can also be argued that white society is the ghost that haunts African Americans. The grotesque, too, is present in this novel, and according to Susan Corey, it is this literary device that grants *Beloved* its complexity and power, as the grotesque as an aesthetic “enables the artist to disrupt the familiar world of reality in order to introduce a different, more mysterious reality” while also allowing Morrison to fulfil her desire to “create discomfort and unease in order to confront her readers with an unfamiliar reality.” (Corey 31)

It is also in *Beloved* that Morrison first introduces the term “rememory”, an element that is present in all her works, but to which she had not given a name up until this novel. At its basic definition, rememory can be understood as “remembering memories”, an act of piercing together old memories by invoking and picturing them vividly to help the characters reconstruct their past and, at times, their own identity. In *Beloved*, Sethe must rememory in order to live with and accept her past, so that she can move forward, away from the traumatic events at Sweet Home and the murder of her baby daughter. But there is also the collective rememory, that of the African American people who are haunted by the memories of the oppression of slavery. In the African American Gothic

this is the true ghost that haunts the characters, who are forced to confront a painful past so that they can assemble their own identity. And indeed, it is the past that haunts *Beloved*, with the ghost of Beloved serving as a corporeal representation of how the memory of slavery and the often-unspeakable events of the past permeate the whole narrative. The term “rememory” is crucial in my dissertation, as the haunting past is also present in the two novels that I will further analyse. In *The Bluest Eye*, characters are haunted by events and traumas of their past, that in turn affect how they act in their daily lives, and how they treat others around them. Namely Cholly and Pauline and the pain that they inflict on their daughter Pecola. In *Song of Solomon* rememory is present in a constant return a slave past, and in the focus that Morrison puts in the crucial role that memory plays in the African American identity.

Although *Beloved* is an essential work to understand the Gothic in Morrison’s corpus, the novels I chose to analyse for the purposes of my dissertation, as mentioned above, have been *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*.

In *The Bluest Eye* we have Pecola, a Black girl who is ostracized by her own community, and is invisible in the eyes of white people. All she wishes for is to have blue eyes, so she can be beautiful and noticed. Implied in Pecola’s desire is a deep racial hatred for oneself, that so many African Americans have internalised. Again, much like in *Beloved*, the Grotesque in this novel can be said to be a direct result of white society’s influence on the black community, and it perfectly illustrates how white standards are destructive, not only in relation to the beauty standards that African Americans try to attain for themselves, but also, and notably for Pecola, for the psyche of the black female. The only reason Pecola is alienated by her peers, and especially by her own mother, is because she does not fit the traditional standards of beauty imposed on her; for one, her skin is described as too black. It is this circumstance that causes her to have unrealistic desires for a more western look, and causes her to descend into

madness, further ostracizing her from her community because of her bizarre behaviour. Pecola perfectly embodies the Gothic process of abjection which, according to Jerrold Hogle,

(...) encourages middle-class people in the west, as we see in many of the lead characters in Gothic fictions, to deal with the tangled contradictions fundamental to their existence by throwing them off onto ghostly or monstrous counterparts that then seem “uncanny” in their unfamiliar familiarity while also conveying overtones of the archaic and the alien in their grotesque mixture of elements viewed as incompatible by established standards of normality. (Hogle 7)

At the same time, what other characters in the book fail to understand, is that Pecola only becomes a “monster” because all of them fail to reach out to her and give her the support she needs, as they are too preoccupied with maintaining the standards of a society that is clearly lacking in morals and spirituality. This, however, may be the reason society so firmly rejects Pecola, because, as Wester explains “Abjection is that which is utterly denied within the self and projected onto an Other body. The abject monster, like the uncanny monster, is both horrible and somewhat familiar”. (Wester 2012: 12)

In what is perhaps the most significant instant of the novel, Pecola suffers sexual abuse at the hands of her father, Cholly, an event which we later learn happens a few more times after the initial rape and which greatly contributes to her trauma, acting as the ultimate catalyst for Pecola’s withdrawal into herself, and eventual insanity. Sexual perversion is one of the most significant Gothic tropes, and incest very clearly falls into that pool of what is subversive and unacceptable. In George Haggerty’s description, “a gothic novel is about fear, specifically erotic fear, and the ways in which desire renders the family a hotbed, as Foucault might say, of sexualized brutality and nightmarish erotic tensions. But this sexual excess, this dysfunctionality, is traceable to that original moment of loss.” (Haggerty 22) Incest in the novel is tied yet another principal element of the Gothic genre, that of the dysfunctional family, which the Breedloves perfectly embody, being a family where, ironically, there is no love but only violence, resentment, and hate. The children are overlooked, and the parents are

constantly involved in violent fights, and this is all happening within the confinements of their “home,” a dilapidated storefront haunted by memories of happier times and previous tenants.

At the end of the book, and finalizing the process of the fragmentation of the self, we witness a doubling of the character of Pecola, as she walks down the street talking to her self, but her other self, in a clear display of the insanity that has befallen her. In the end, she too is projecting her fears onto an Other, as way of soothing her anxieties over her looks.

Song of Solomon features supernatural and fantastic aspects of the Grotesque and the Gothic more prominently. It tells us the story of Milkman Dead, who is initially alienated from himself and his culture, but who eventually escapes the constraints of society and his family by embarking on a journey to find a treasure. But in the end, he finds himself by discovering the history of his ancestors. The novel heavily relies on the folk tale of the Flying African to tell its story, a tale about the enslaved blacks in America who managed to escape back home to Africa by learning how to fly. The line between the real and the unreal in this novel is often blurred, with some characters being presented to us as mythical beings who have otherworldly powers, namely Pilate and Circe, in what I argue is a clear aspect of the Gothic influences in the novel, especially when we read Hogle’s assertion that:

Gothic fictions generally play with and oscillate between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural ... often siding with one of these over the other in the end, but usually raising the possibility that the boundaries between these may have been crossed, at least psychologically but also physically or both. (Hogle 2)

The fantastic and the supernatural are present in some of the most significant places and passages in the novel, namely the forest, which seems to be alive, paralleling Milkman’s movements, breathing, and guiding him in his journey. The most Gothic imagery in the novel happens when Milkman visits the Butler Mansion, a decrepit house that has been taken over by the forest, and encounters Circe, who opens Milkman’s mind to the possibility of the supernatural.

Pilate is perhaps the most notorious embodiment of the Grotesque in *Song of Solomon*. Having been born without a navel, she is deemed a freak by the community and is essentially exiled from it, living an almost hermetic life. Although she tries to insert herself in her community, she is left alone in the world because she is seen as someone who is strange and dangerous, due to her lack of navel. Because of this, she is forced to raise herself and this is what sets her apart from everyone else, as she establishes a strong bond with nature, meaning that the boundaries which other humans face are not necessarily applicable to her. Her supernatural qualities are evident throughout the novel, with the implication that she has shapeshifting abilities that allow her to adapt to any situation she is faced with, and her ability to love is also described by Morrison as if it were a superpower, which can be associated with Hogle's concept that "The Gothic often shows its readers that the anomalous foundations they seek to abject have become culturally associated with the otherness of femininity, a *maternal* multiplicity basic to us all." (Hogle 10)

Similarly, to *The Bluest Eye*, in *Song of Solomon* we also have the trope of the dysfunctional family, and incest is also heavily implied to be present in the narrative. This takes place within the Dead household, where we have Macon Dead as the imposing patriarch, and his wife Ruth, and daughters Magdalene and First Corinthians. Macon symbolizes the trope of the patriarch who must have full control over the women in his family, in a clear display of patriarchal violence. And this is one of the instances where Toni Morrison cleverly uses the Female Gothic to write about the struggles of her female characters. The term Female Gothic was first conceived in 1976 by Ellen Moers, and at the time she described it as something that could be "easily defined" as the literary work that women writers have done in the gothic genre. However, Diane Long Hoeveler goes further in her definition of the sub-genre, when she explains the Female Gothic as a device for women to write about concerns that are typically female, such as housework, marriage, motherhood and inequality, while using typical

themes and conventions of the Gothic (Hoeveler 99) Thus, for female writers of the Gothic, the true horrors of life lie in the patriarchal home, as well as the often suffocating marriage and motherhood. (Hoeveler 111). In *Song of Solomon* the three women are forced to remain prisoners in their home, constantly making fake flowers for sale. The house here, too, can be said to be haunted by the restraints that black women face from the men in their lives. The Dead house, then, serves as an example of the “Female Gothic’s sense of domestic abjection as the home. This domestic space, articulated as a feminized space of comfort in reality is governed by a threatening patriarchy that offers imprisonment and death should the heroine fail to fulfil her role.” (Wester 2012: 163). It is perhaps because of this abuse that Ruth Dead develops incestuous tendencies towards her son Milkman, in another example of sexual pervasiveness in Morrison’s work.

Along these lines, it is my goal in this dissertation to demonstrate how Toni Morrison appropriates many of the Grotesque and Gothic tropes in these two novels, as a way to write the horrors and traumas that are part of the reality of her characters, as well as how she uses African-American tales and myths to imbue a supernatural quality to her narratives.

I - *The Bluest Eye*: The Trauma That Haunts
Race

1 – The Breedloves

The Breedlove family – Cholly, Pauline, Pecola and Sammy – embody all that is considered grotesque by those around them. Their physiognomy and behaviour set them apart, pushing them towards the fringes of society. Inhabiting a decrepit store turned into apartment that lacks any kind of comfort, Pauline and Cholly live their lives performing rituals of violence against each other, which in turn traumatise their children. Conformed with their status and race, they each face the world sporting the ugliness that was imposed on them. Although they are seen as the villains of the story, Morrison allows us to look into their psyche to evaluate the stigmas and discrimination that have scarred this family, making them victims of their environment, and how this trauma informs the actions that they carry out through the narrative.

Affected by poverty and racism, the Breedloves live in misery, abjected by their own community. They are forced to live beyond the boundaries of society, and thus act as mere observers in others' lives, without ever really causing any effect in them except for disgust. Melanie Anderson cleverly labels the Breedlove family as the “social ghosts” of the novel. According to her “The social ghost is a natural by-product of the national power structure of domination and freedom (...) in a binary relationship, the social ghost is the haunting signifier of the broad and generative space between.” (Anderson 21) Thus, as part of the African American community, which is already ostracized by the dominating culture, while at the same time being deemed too dark and ugly by other Black people, the Breedloves remain in some kind of social limbo, barely existing and haunting those who choose to reject them.

Ironically, the Breedloves are the only characters in the novel who live a truly authentic life. Although they do strive to achieve some aspects of white culture (specifically Pauline and Pecola), the Breedloves fully accept that they are ugly by the standards of the society that they are inserted in, of which they are informed by from “every billboard, every movie, every

glance.” (TBE 37) Having come to the North from the American South where, as Pauline notes, there were barely any other white people, Pauline and Cholly have grown up in full acceptance of their blackness, not being influenced by the “*Northern colored folk*” who were “*No better than whites for meanness.*” (TBE 115) and thus they had never experienced living under the oppression of a dominating society that influenced their own peers in such a way, that they were exiled from their community simply for being Black. Although they are looked down upon for their misery, it is not their poverty that makes them monsters in the eyes of others. As the narrator explains, poverty was common within African Americans. Rather, it was the fact that they were ugly, and it was their “ugliness [which] was unique.” (TBE 36) This ugliness, of course, is inherent to their full acceptance that they are Black, and it is not until they live in the North for a while that they fully start internalising this self-belief that they are ugly. In fact, “No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly.” (TBE 36) because they become stuck in a community that chooses to project their own self-loathing onto them.

Having moved up North, like many others, in search of a better job and a better life, Pauline and Cholly quickly become disillusioned due to the lack of a feeling of community in the town of Lorrain. It is at this point that their lives start to fall apart as discrimination slowly seeps into their day-to-day, turning them into each other as they are not capable of fighting the establishment. Eric Savoy points out that “the Gothic, it is frequently reasoned, embodies and gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of “the American dream.”” (Savoy 167); for the Breedloves, that underside is the systemic racism that they had managed to keep at bay up until then, as they were a part of a supportive community. Their search for a dream turns into a nightmare, as the hope for a better life is replaced with poverty and violence. This decay manifests itself physically in both characters, with Pauline losing her teeth and giving up on taking care of herself, and Cholly turning into alcoholism as a coping mechanism.

Without a doubt, Pauline and Cholly's trauma also play an essential role in their degeneration. Because they cannot get away from the ghosts of their past, they unwillingly allow them to infiltrate every aspect of their lives with catastrophic consequences. Morrison gives us a glimpse into the early years of Pauline and Cholly, so as to give us readers an explanation of their actions, as well as to make us empathize with two people who are ultimately the products of racial violence. Although *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first novel, we begin to see the early sketches of "rememories" in this work. However, unlike how it happens in her following novels, where "rememories" help characters understand their past in order to construct their identities, in this novel, Pauline and Cholly find themselves incapable of escaping their past, and thus they become stuck in it. They do not resolve their feelings, and thus are not able to move forward.

This is especially true for Cholly Breedlove, who after being abandoned by his mother on the railroad, grows up as an orphaned child, raised by his Aunt Jimmy who is the only person to show him love and affection, until her death, when he is left, still a child, completely alone and helpless in the world. Significantly, it is on the day of his Aunt Jimmy's funeral that Cholly's defining traumatic episode takes place. Cholly sneaks out of the funeral with a girl, Darlene, and together they go to a muscadine vineyard, where they engage in sexual activity. Suddenly, they are discovered by two white men who humiliate Cholly by forcing him to continue while they watch, threatening him with guns. Feeling violated but aware that, as a Black boy, he cannot resist two grown white men, Cholly follows their orders, channelling all of his hatred for the white men into Darlene

Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it—hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much. The flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile. He stared at Darlene's hands covering her face in the moon and lamplight. They looked like baby claws. (TBE 146)

Furthermore, Cholly will carry an irrational hate for Darlene, because she is the only other witness of his shame. It is this event in Cholly's life that will define how he carries himself and

how he treats other people, for the rest of the narrative. This is characteristic of Morrison's writing, who often "dramatizes the painful sense of exposure that accompanies the single shame event and also the devastating effect of chronic shame on her characters' sense of individual and social identity" (Bouson 124) Cholly defines himself as a "free man", not because he is allowed to live his life as he wants, but because he is constantly pushed, by himself and others, to marginalization. Living outside of societal norms is easier for him, it protects him from any other shameful events.

Throughout the rest of his life, knowing that even as an adult man he remains powerless in the face of white Americans, Cholly will redirect his hatred of white supremacy into women. First, into his wife Pauline, who he regards as "one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt." (TBE 40) and whom he constantly violently fights "with a darkly brutal formalism" (TBE 41) that has become almost ritualistic in their household. Eventually, his focused hatred will fall on his daughter Pecola, to whom he commits one of the most abhorrent acts that another human being could inflict on another. As he gets home in a drunkenly state, he observes his daughter washing the dishes and is inundated with a barrage of different feelings "Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence." and again, he feels the uncontrollable need to cause pain to a little girl who he despises for the simple fact that she exists "He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly." (TBE 159) This juxtaposition of feelings signifies Cholly's inner struggle against his demons. At one point in his life, he was a child who knew love, but unfortunately, the threat of racism permeated his life and he cannot run away from his traumas. His mind is so warped, that even though he believes what he does to Pecola is an act of love, he fails to realise that it is an act just as abusive as the one the white men inflicted on him

The tenderness welled up in him, and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. Crawling on all fours toward her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke ... Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling. He put his head down and nibbled at the back of her leg. His mouth trembled at the firm sweetness of the flesh. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist. The rigidness of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat, was better than Pauline's easy laughter had been. (TBE 160)

It is at this point that Cholly sexually abuses his daughter for the first time, committing the unspeakable act of incest, and passing on his extreme trauma onto her. As previously mentioned, Morrison does not want us to look at Cholly as a monster for his actions, but rather look beyond his act to try and understand the circumstances that led him to commit the said act. Sexually abusing his daughter is how Cholly tries to regain authority in a world that has rendered him impotent, even if that happens at the costs of his own daughter. With this, Morrison exposes the system that victimizes Cholly by depicting incest as “a consequence of the disempowerment of the black male, who because of racism is not able to fulfil the role of father” (Scott 2010: 97)

Incest was established as a Gothic trope with Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* which explores incestuous desire within familial relationships. In Gothic narratives, father-daughter incest is, according to DiPlacidi, a reflection of the abuses “inherent in the emerging nuclear family and domestic spaces” (DiPlacidi 2018 b): 35) which eventually leads to the destruction of the family main nucleus. At the same time, the Gothic heroine – Pecola – is often alone and defenceless in the face of incestuous rape, as the perpetrator is the male character who should be the hero in charge of protecting her. Cholly's incestuous abuse of Pecola is the culmination of a life of trauma, and a violent home environment, and it results in the disintegration of the Breedlove family, with Cholly and Sammy leaving Pauline and Pecola to live on their own.

Significantly, Pecola's rape takes place inside her own home, furthering the sense of the Breedlove's storefront as a “house of horrors”, and making the abuse even more horrendous, as it happens inside a domestic space. The storefront that the Breedloves rent “Festering together in the debris of a realtor's whim.” (TBE 33) is symbolic of the family's

own dynamic and psyche¹. The house itself is decrepit, a landlord's botched job who simply put up a wood panel to divide the space into two rooms, and contains run-down, unremarkable furniture that carries no memories of having been lived in. This is not a house of love and safety, but rather one of violence and hate. It is the place where the parents' trauma trickles down into their own children, who act out in different ways: Sammy by copying the violence, and running away, Pecola by retreating into herself and wishing to disappear. Apart from the fighting episodes, the only sign of life in the whole house is the coal stove, as the family chooses to live together but apart, "each making his own patchwork quilt of reality—collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there." (TBE 33) giving them the sense that they do not belong to the family, or to the house. Much like they have become ghosts within society, they also become ghosts to each other, inside their own home. This fragmentation of the family unit likely begins to happen due to the gradual disinterest of the matriarch, Pauline. As she delves deeper into the white world of her employers' house, "she neglect[s] her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edge" (TBE 125) The storefront house, devoid of any identity or warmth, slowly seeps into the Breedloves until it becomes a mirror of their lives – battered, displaced and fragmented.

Morrison writes the Breedloves in *The Bluest Eye* to exemplify the way in which racism affects Black families, marginalizing them to such a degree that they barely exist within their community. The trauma that affects the Breedloves is the trauma of the African American community, who struggles to detach from the ghosts of the past. This is exacerbated by the members of the community who decline a confrontation with the past and surrender to the same

¹ Houses in *The Bluest Eye* are yet another representation of the divisions between race and class. Inside the African American community, Geraldine's house stands in direct opposition of the Breedlove's storefront, while also representing a mirror into the life of the inhabitant.

ideals that have oppressed their people for centuries. The Breedloves also demonstrate the dangers of a divided African American community, who thrives when rooted in their own culture.

2 – The Horrors of Racism

African American writers have long appropriated the Gothic genre to write about their experiences living in American society. This appropriation took the shape of subversion, with Black writers disrupting the established Gothic canons, that previously oppressed them, to tell about the horrors of their own history. A marginalized group since their trafficking into the United States of America, after the abolition of slavery African Americans were faced with the issue of whether to integrate into an oppressive community that did not accept them, choosing to abdicate of their identity, or to keep their identity and culture, effectively ostracizing themselves from society further. Having to assimilate into a dominant white culture, Black people struggled with the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (DuBois 8) which resulted in self-internalized hate and racism, that was then projected onto their own community, or rather, those in the Black community who were deemed to be too dark, even for African Americans, who did not wish to associate with them. The Gothic, then, became one of the Black writer’s most powerful tool to denounce the discourse of racial discrimination. As Maisha Wester points out, much of the Gothic writings of the nineteenth century featured a racist rhetoric that was influenced by the imperialist fear that the “other” was going to invade one’s land and degenerate the white society (Wester 2014: 157, 159) However, by taking charge of the Gothic’s diverse tropes, Black writers manage to use it to write about “the peculiar tribulations of racial otherness itself.” (Wester 171)

The Black community in the Lorain, Ohio of *The Bluest Eye* has internalized and conformed to the superiority of white culture, and thus unconsciously spread racist ideals

within their own, and onto their own children. They find in the Breedloves - outsiders, deemed to be too ugly because of their dark skin and more prominent African features – the perfect marks to direct their racial self-loathing towards. Already a group that has been “othered” by American society, they alienate the Breedloves even further in order to feel better about themselves. With this, Morrison intended to bring to light the dangers and grotesqueness of cultural hegemony, by demonstrating how it can easily divide one community, and turn them against one individual or group. As she states in the novel’s afterword, she wanted to deconstruct the reasons as to why the white gaze dictated the beauty standards of the time, and she wanted readers to not remain inactive in their pity of Pecola’s story, but rather reflect on their own contribution to this cultural hegemony. It is here that she expertly employs the Gothic as a way to make a quasi-political statement. According to Hogle

the Gothic also serves to symbolize our struggles and ambivalences over how dominant categorizations of people (...) can be blurred together and so threaten our convenient, but repressive thought patterns (...) [the] Gothic show[s] us our cultural and psychological selves and conditions (...) in ways that other aesthetic forms cannot manage (...) Such self-exposures can create occasions for us to reassess our standard oppositions and distinctions – and thus our prejudices – at which point Gothic can activate its revolutionary and boundary-changing impulses and lead us to dissolve some of the rigidities and their otherings of people by which we live and from which much of the Gothic takes its shape. (Hogle 19)

The only character in the novel that actively rejects white cultural dominance, and refuses to assimilate to it, is Claudia MacTeer. Even at 9-years-old Claudia is aware that the constant pushing on the adults’ part of white symbols and adoration, towards her comes from a place of self-hatred. The obsession with white culture manifests inside herself into a violent hatred of all white people. As she observes her sister and Pecola gushing over Shirley Temple, she reflects that “I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred. But before that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world.” (TBE 17) Much like she felt the need to dismember all of the unwanted white dolls that she received as gifts, she wished to be able to do the same to white girls. Not so that she could

physically hurt them, but because she thought that by tearing them apart and seeing what was inside them, she would finally understand what made white girls so special and different from her. What made adults rave about white girls, but not her, and what made Pecola's mum tend so carefully to her white boss's daughter while simultaneously treating her own daughter in such a degrading way.

Through the act of gifting little black girls with white, blue-eyed, blonde dolls on special occasions, adults are telling children that partaking in white culture is a privilege that must be earned and revered by them. When she is scolded for breaking her dolls, the message to Claudia is that she should feel thankful that she is allowed to have something as precious as a white doll, and her feelings do not matter. Claudia also fails to understand why Mr. Bojangles, who she sees as "*my friend, my uncle, my daddy*, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me." (TBE 17) is dancing with and adoring a little white girl, and not her. She cannot fathom why an African American man would not choose to be dancing with an African American girl like her. Lastly, Claudia witnesses the different treatment that her school colleague gets from teachers and other children for the simple fact that her skin is light. It is at this point in her life that Claudia inadvertently comes across the issue of the African American double-consciousness, when she realises that not only is she a girl, she is first and foremost a *black* girl, and that she is not allowed to navigate the world in the same way that a white girl is. As W.E.B DuBois writes in *The Souls of Black Folk*, African Americans have in them two halves "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (DuBois 8) Some Black people, like Claudia, manage to live their lives while conciliating the two parts of themselves, others, like Pecola, succumb under the strength of the dominant culture. Eventually, becoming aware of the pain that these standards cause her, Claudia decides to conform to society, as a way to protect herself from further abuse. She

understands that loving white culture is a refuge and a “hiding place ... Thus, the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her” (TBE 21) It is this fear too that encourages the rest of the African American community in the novel to blindly worship American white beauty standards, because the closer they try to get to them, the less likely they are to be repudiated. This is a real concern in the African American Gothic, which “shudder[s] in terror over the very process of being made and masked as monstrous and the consequences of such masking, for monsters have no right and no place in civil society.” (Wester 2012: 27)

This terror of being othered is conflated by the Black people in the novel with the fear of being “outdoors”. In the novel, their race, which grants them with a “peripheral existence” and brands them a minority is “something we had learned to deal with – probably because it was abstract.” (TBE 15) It is poverty and homelessness that truly mark someone as being inferior, due to the concreteness of it. As Black people, they need to cling to anything that will get them further away from the margins of society, and that is ownership of things, which plays into the consumerism of the American culture. Which is why, for them, “Outdoors ... was the real terror of life.” (TBE 15) that would ultimately not only set them apart from the dominant society, but also from their own community, as it is once again exemplified by the Breedloves. The Breedloves live in a rented store, and at various points in their lives are thrown outdoors because of Cholly’s actions. This earns him the reputation of someone who is “beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger.” (TBE 16) exiled even further from the rest of the Black population. However, it is curious that this seems to be an affliction that only affects Black people who live in the city, where white people abound. The fear of being outdoors for those in the countryside seems to be non-existent. The dangers of being a Black person roaming in a predominantly white city are real, and thus, unlike other Gothic works where the haunted house is the site of fear, *The*

Bluest Eye presents characteristics of the Urban Gothic, by making the whole city the place where all the horrors in the narrative happen.

As stated by Leonard Cassuto “the urban Gothic readily produces anxiety, a sense of danger whose location can’t be pinpointed. When danger pervades the atmosphere but can’t be confronted directly, that lack of direction creates anxiety, an emotion that can be much harder to manage than fear.” (Cassuto 157) Black people “fussed and fidgeted” over their own homes because in here the home is the safe space, that protects them from what is outside. And what the outside implies is not only the confirmation of their condition as “others” but also the exposure to the dangers of being a Black person in America². The outdoors represent the unknown, there is the awareness of the dangers of white people that may be encountered while roaming around the city without a safe place to run back to, but it is impossible to know, in the confusion of urban life, where the danger truly lies. It is a threat that is constantly lurking around the corner. While this plays into the terror that pervades the novel, imbuing it with a Gothic feel, it is noteworthy that the menacing presences in *The Bluest Eye* are real and not spectral, playing into the Urban Gothic’s focus “on human rather than supernatural monsters” inasmuch as “the urban Gothic links traditional Gothic horror and the literature of realism. Unlike haunted houses, cities are real places” (Cassuto 166)

Indeed, the true monster that threatens the characters in the novel is white society, and, by default, white people. As the dominant community, they are the ones who can inflict the most damage on African Americans, not only physical, but mainly psychological. And their

² While it is true that the novel is set in the North of the United States, where there were no segregationist laws and Black people had more freedom, it is also worthy of note that the narrative takes place during 1941, when there were tensions regarding discrimination of Black military personnel during World War II. During this time, the NAACP threatened to organize a March on Washington, and encouraged by the number of African American soldiers in the army, and increasing financial help, set forth numerous attacks against discriminatory laws. This would have undoubtedly spurred on hostilities against African Americans, in a country that has never truly been safe for them.

biggest weapon in doing so is their total indifference towards Black people, who become totally invisible in the eyes of others. In other words, white people in the novel treat African Americans as if they are ghosts, and they are denied any kind of existence, due to the fact that they are different, not inserted in the mainstream community. The consequences of this kind of treatment are obviously evidenced in Pecola, but in truth, no other character in the novel is safe from the perils of the white standards. Those who choose to assimilate the culture are too, in a way, erasing their true selves, becoming “unbeings”. The dangers of erasing one’s identity in favour of an oppressive force are twofold

passive fragmentation/ loss of self, and active oppression as the individual is forced to fit within strict roles. In terms of passive torment, when using the gothic to articulate the perils of monolithic identities, the writers represent cultural trauma as a kind of melancholia. As such, the melancholic individual is subsumed by the loss or trauma, and the self is rendered “illusory” in cases of racial identification (Wester 2012: 156)

As Toni Morrison states in an interview with Claudia Tate, Black people in the United States are looked upon as being pariahs, who live in proximity but still apart from the main civilization (Morrison and Taylor-Guthrie 168) Thus, the Black characters in the novel either are not seen, or are not given the privilege of being seen as humans, by white people. Pecola finally becomes aware of the dehumanization of people of her race during her encounter with the white shopkeeper from whom she buys Mary Janes. As she faces him, she realises he avoids to direct his gaze at her, and when he finally does, all she sees in his eyes is “The total absence of human recognition” (TBE 46) Much like it happened to Claudia earlier, this is when Pecola becomes familiarized with the feeling of double-consciousness that affects African Americans. At first, she is puzzled by his indifference, and puts it down to their difference in age and gender. However, as she further reflects on the matter, she remembers all the times that she has recognised this look in other white people’s faces, which makes her reach the conclusion that “the distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes.” (TBE 47) Here, she realises that her race is

something that cannot be changed about her, and that her beauty and worth are determined by other people's eyes, not by her own. While Pecola's initial reaction at being made to feel invisible are of anger, this quickly subsides into shame, ensuing the complete annihilation of her self, so as to feel seen within the white society that has outcast her. As she was informed all her life of her inferiority by her peers, it was inevitable that Pecola would succumb into internalized loathing after her confrontation with the white gaze. Pecola, then, is the personification of how Morrison expertly problematizes the "physical and mental deformity of her protagonists to intensify the sufferings of the Blacks struggling in the White dominated community in America." (Aggarwal 97)

Pecola's mother, Pauline, goes through a similar situation when she is giving birth to her daughter. As she lies on her bed in pain, all but one of the medical staff refuse to acknowledge her as a real woman, or give her any kind of comfort, like they give to the white women that are also giving birth around her. Pauline observes

They looked at my stomach and between my legs. They never said nothing to me. Only one looked at me. Looked at my face, I mean (...) He knowed, I reckon, that maybe I weren't no horse foaling. But them others. They didn't know. They went on. I seed them talking to them white women (...) I hurt just like them white women. (TBE 123)

Even in situations of great duress, Black people are denied any kind of human treatment. They are made to feel inferior, as if they are the monsters of the story, when in reality, the evil all lies in those who see themselves as being superior.

The true haunting thing in *The Bluest Eye* is racism. It is the fear and danger that pervades the lives of African Americans, who are forced to live in the margins of society - some are driven to madness, others allow the perils of hegemony to infiltrate their lives and tear apart their communities by unwittingly taking part in the culture that oppresses their own, by "othering" those who do not fit into their beauty standards. While Black people are made out to be the monsters in society, this is only internalised by them because of the

white people that refuse to view them as human beings, a belief that inevitably is spread through the whole community.

3 – Pecola Breedlove

From the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison cautions us readers that Pecola Breedlove, the novel's young protagonist, has not led a happy life. Claudia MacTeer, one of the narrators, discloses in the novel's second prologue that Pecola was pregnant with her own father's baby, thus facing us from the start with the fact that this is going to be a rather complex novel, dealing with difficult and grotesque issues. As Morrison states in an interview previously quoted, her characters do not lead easy lives, and that is most certainly applicable to Pecola Breedlove. The 11-year-old begins the novel as a quiet but content little girl, albeit unhappy with how she looks, but suffers so much abuse at the hands of her own father, as well as her own community, that the narrative leads to her inevitable descent into madness. Pecola is arguably the most grotesque of Morrison's characters, not only due to her physical appearance and psychological state which alienate her from her people, but also because she exposes the grotesqueness of American beauty standards, which glorify whiteness.

Pecola is born into the Breedlove family, to a deadbeat father and a mother who is obsessed with the movies and white actresses. From her birth, her mother is disappointed with how she looks, as it does not correspond to the idea that she had formed in her head, stating that "*I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.*" (TBE 124) Pecola's perception of herself is, then, influenced by her mother from the very beginning of her life, into believing that she is ugly, which in turn shapes her entire identity. It is this ugliness that will set her apart in her community, who chooses to reject her as something grotesque that should not be looked at. Alienated by those around her, Pecola spends the first

part of the novel yearning for someone to love her, looking for this affection within another ostracized group – the prostitutes that live above her family’s storefront, who are the only ones in the novel to treat her like a person, talk to her and answer her questions. Gradually, we see the trauma of living in abjection with a family that constantly resorts to the extremes of violence. Pecola’s only wish is to disappear, and she prays to god to erase her from this world. She manages to efface every part of her being except for her eyes. Her eyes are always left behind, she believes, because they are the thing in her body that carries everything she knows, all the things she has seen, and all of her memories. She then concludes that in order to change herself, she needs to change her eyes. This will result in Pecola using her ugliness as a mask with which to hide from others, “Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask.” (TBE 37)

It is this that pushes her further into the realm of fantasy, which she uses as an armour against the world around her. She clings to an obsession with whiteness and the desire to have blue eyes, which she sees as the only escape from the traumatic life that she leads and will result in a complete loss of a sense of self, and compartmentalization of her persona. This is in keeping with other African American Gothic works which

emphasize the various perils of denying and erasing difference. Specifically, such denial results in two types of torment: passive fragmentation/ loss of self, and active oppression as the individual is forced to fit within strict roles. In terms of passive torment, when using the gothic to articulate the perils of monolithic identities, the writers represent cultural trauma as a kind of melancholia. As such, the melancholic individual is subsumed by the loss or trauma, and the self is rendered “illusory” in cases of racial identification (Wester 2012: 156)

Undoubtedly, Pecola’s trauma is a product of society, which refuses to see Blacks as people, favouring white beauty standards as the only acceptable ones. Crucially, this is perpetrated even further by her own African American community who, by failing to view her as a person worthy of love, someone who should be “one of their own”, fuels her desire to be beautiful in the eyes of others even further. Pecola interiorizes her community’s self-hatred so deeply, that she starts believing that she will be able to attain these ideal standards by drinking from a

Shirley Temple cup, or eating the Mary Jane sweets, which feature “A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort.” (TBE 48) In a desperate attempt to escape from her invisibility, she concludes that by eating Mary Jane’s eyes, she would achieve her biggest desire, for her own eyes “those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.” (TBE 44) to be blue.

Truthfully, Pecola’s desire for blue eyes is not so that she can feel more beautiful physically, but rather she wishes for blue eyes as she believes that they will fix all of the problems in her life. Having blue eyes will improve her traumatic life, as she naively assumes that they will have the power to stop her parents from fighting, and that with blue eyes she will be accepted, seen, and loved by other people. What Pecola fails to realise, but Morrison wants us to understand as readers, is that having blue eyes will turn her into a grotesque within a grotesque. Grotesque in appearance, and grotesque because she will have interiorized all of the self-hatred and trauma of an entire community into herself. As Morrison explains in the novel’s afterword, her aim with this novel was to focus on “how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member; a female.” (Morrison 2016: 206)

Because of her appearance, Pecola becomes a vessel for the whole of the Black community’s self-hatred

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humour. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (TBE 203)

The Black community of Lorain then uses Pecola as a scapegoat because she makes it easier for them to carry the burden of the white gaze that has haunted African Americans for centuries. What Pecola does not realise is that other people's eyes have already been trained to look at her as something grotesque, just so they do not have to face their own ugliness. Thus, even if her eyes did miraculously change, she would never be seen as beautiful by them. As Jerrold Hogle explains

the conflicted positions of central Gothic characters can reveal them as haunted by a second "unconscious" of deep-seated social and historical dilemmas, often of many types at once, that become more fearsome the more characters and readers attempt to cover them up or reconcile them symbolically without resolving them fundamentally. (Hogle 3)

In this way, her attempts to achieve her wish are ultimately useless, because her issues are rooted in the society that she is inserted in, not in herself. And that is why she breaks down into her delusion, choosing to live outside the realm of the real world, without ever being given the opportunity of facing her trauma.

To this degree, Keith Byerman argues that Pecola personifies the figure of the Messiah in the novel, stating that "she gives the world not grace but the illusion of relief from intolerable circumstances. She is sacrificed so that others may live with the perversions of society." (Byerman 452) While I do not disagree with this idea, I contend further that Pecola is the embodiment of the Africanist "Other" in the Gothic novel. The concept of the Africanist presence in literature was introduced by Morrison in her literary criticism book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. She delineates that "The fabrication of and Africanistic persona was reflexive; of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness (as well as in others), an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity." (Morrison 2019: 144) This Africanist presence was, then, an often-Black character that was used by whites as a device for the representation of the most shameful aspects within themselves that were deemed unacceptable by society, which they projected onto an "Other" that they could demonize. The

“Other” is seen as a monstrous and grotesque character that remains ostracized, burdened with the anomalies that they refuse to confront in themselves. It is exactly this that Claudia accuses the African American community in *The Bluest Eye* of doing against Pecola. Marked since birth as someone who is ugly and not deserving of love, Pecola becomes an easy target for people to dump their hate and insecurities into, slowly building up the perception of her as grotesque. In order to see Pecola as a person, people would have to face their demons, and the psychological abuse that they put the little girl through, which they refuse to do.

Through the grotesque character of Pecola Breedlove, Morrison exposes the grotesqueness of a society that not only shuns a little girl, but that fails to show any empathy for her; after all the abuse that she has suffered turns her into a fragmented person. Byerman describes the grotesque as something that is at once both repulsive and attractive (Byerman 448) and certainly, the adults in the novel refuse to feel any sympathy for someone they find so loathsome, while simultaneously being incapable of looking away from Pecola’s situation and gossiping about it. In her narration, Claudia laments that

our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, “Poor little girl,” or, “Poor baby,” but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils. (TBE 188)

It is the rape and impregnation at the hands of her father that act as the final catalysts for Pecola’s unavoidable descent into a state of what Morrison describes of “void unbeing” (Morrison 2016: 211) Living in a world of her own illusion, constructed for protection against any kind of outside abuse, and disregarded by her own mother and other adults, Pecola is unable to process the abhorrent act that Cholly perpetrated on her. Consequently, Pecola fragments herself into two parts: one that believes she has finally achieved her desire of having blue eyes, and can now be happy; and one that represents the psychological haunting of her past, who gives her pointed reminders of the horrors she has suffered, which Pecola still refuses to confront. This imaginary figure is brought to life by Pecola due to her need for a friend,

someone to talk to about her blue eyes who no one else seems to be able to see. However, while this figure reassures Pecola of the beauty of her blue eyes, it is also a representation of the inescapable nature of the past, and of how memories can haunt one's life. In truth, the figure is merely a piece of Pecola's mind, who keeps trying to resurface the painful memories that she stubbornly tries to repress

I guess you're right. And Cholly could make anybody do anything.

He could not.

He made you, didn't he?

Shut up!

I was only teasing.

Shut up! (TBE 197)

The belief that she has blue eyes and that she has finally found a friend, outwardly manifests itself as a strange series of tics and demeanours that fully alienate her from society

A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfilment ... She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away; children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright. ... She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. (TBE 202)

The townspeople face Pecola's madness as something that was inevitable, that she brought down on herself. Only Claudia, a child, has the discerning nature to understand that it was them who assassinated Pecola's sense of self into a state of complete destruction, by refusing to give her any affection.

Pecola's abjection brings to light the damages caused by the internalized self-hatred of the African American race, exposing the grotesque chain of abuse that starts with the white American society, and is inflicted within the Black community as an expurgation of the title of "Other", onto those of their own community. Pecola is grotesque because her peers have determined that she is grotesque, thus inflicting their own hatred on a little girl, whose identity is destroyed by her wish to conform with the norms of her society.

II - *Song of Solomon*: Ghosts of the Past as Vehicles for Identity

1 – Dead Houses and Dysfunctional Families

Song of Solomon tells the story of how Milkman Dead goes on a journey of self-discovery where he leaves behind the materialistic life that he grew up in to construct a new, authentic identity by discovering and connecting with the history of his ancestors. But it also tells the story of how, by embarking on this journey, Milkman can escape the influence of an oppressive patriarch, his father Macon Dead. His whole life, Milkman has lived in a house devoid of happiness, where Macon controls everything and everyone around him, becoming a frightful presence, especially for the women of the family – Ruth, First Corinthians, and Mary Magdalene. In this way, Morrison provides readers with a modern interpretation of the Gothic trope of the dysfunctional family cursed by a tyrant, and a protagonist who realises the need to escape from this to environment.

Morrison often uses houses as a site of haunting and trauma for her characters, and it is no different with the Dead family home. The twelve-room house on Not Doctor Street can easily be perceived from the outside as a grand place, a sign of money and prosperity, that causes envy on others. However, observant visitors notice that the house is in fact “more prison than palace” and because on the inside, the darkness and abuse that permeate the house are palpable, visitors end up feeling “sorry for Ruth Foster and her dry daughters.” (SoS 11) The house as prison plays into the Gothic element of claustrophobia, as the women feel a sense of helplessness when they are entrapped in their own home, submitted to the wills of the men of the family. When Macon Dead is home the house trembles under his violence, but even when he is not present, his oppression can still be felt by the women of the house. Trivial things like a watermark from a vase on a wooden table remind Ruth of an instance when her husband angrily assaulted her. The daughters spend the day working in silence, fearful of any sign that their father has come home, which reflects the psychological violence perpetrated against female characters in the Gothic, as Massé explains “The silence, immobility, and enclosure of

the heroines mark their internalization of repression as well as the power of the repressing force.” (Massé 688) Indeed, Macon exerts such a tyrannical control over the Dead women, that they live in a constant state of fear that paralyses them to stillness and makes them extra aware of anything that might trigger his violent behaviours.

Macon Dead is the patriarch of his family and the owner and landlord of several buildings in Detroit. After witnessing his father being shot and murdered by white men who steal his property, Macon turns into a materialistic man, who is obsessed with wealth and status. He is not only Dead by name, but he is also an emotionally and spiritually dead man, who feels no empathy or compassion for anyone around him, be it his family or his tenants. Before we even meet his character, we are told that Macon is

Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparkled in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices. (SoS 12)

In this sense, Macon clearly fits into the Gothic trope of the villainous patriarch who, according to Massé, does not fulfil his role of protector, but rather strips women of their voice, identity and property (Massé 682) However, Morrison also uses his character to highlight the issue of gender distinctions within the Black community, and how Black women are often oppressed by their own, when Black men feel the need to exert control over the women in order to safeguard a sense of community. Much like the oppressive males of Gothic fiction, the men in *Song of Solomon* assume a position of total power and demand complete submission to their wills, as Anne Williams explains of villainous men in Gothic literature “Each man turns the resources of culture to his purposes. Each woman is imprisoned in his "house," and each man uses language to manipulate the victim.” (Williams 112) Thus, in the novel, the Dead women sacrifice their own freedom and authority, to serve their husband and son, father, and brother. They lived their whole lives being mistreated by Macon, and ignored by Milkman, who see them only as inconsequential

possessions. As Wester explains “the black father’s need to control and master the body of daughter / sister / wife reinstitutes racial violence, even as the women’s defiance of such control is read as racial betrayal.” (Wester 2012: 166) So the women in *Song of Solomon* are raised to believe that any form of resistance to male violence is a betrayal against their own community, and at the same time they are taught to keep their heads down and, in the case of the Dead women, continue making roses.

However, Morrison, who appropriates the Gothic and makes it her own, defies the traditions of the genre, and makes the women in her novel resist, shedding themselves of the role of the oppressed damsel in distress. When Corinthians goes behind her father and brother’s backs and enters a relationship with Porter that is an act of defiance, as she starts thinking about ways to leave her prison and finally take control of her own life. When Milkman finds out about this relationship, he, believing he has control over his sisters, forbids Corinthians of ever seeing Porter again. This is when Magdalene steps up and confronts her brother over his mistreatment of the women in his family

Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped for you. (Sos 267)

This is not only a significant event for Magdalene, who eschews the role of victim and carer for the men of her life, and can finally start living for herself, it is also a crucial episode in Milkman’s journey of self-discovery and growth. This is when he realises all the harm he has done to his mother, who he has always looked down on, to his sisters, who lived their lives to serve him, and to Hagar, who was driven to madness because of his treatment of her. I argue that it is at this moment in the book that Milkman becomes the hero of the story, by diverging from the role of the oppressive patriarch, and becoming someone who can “envision women with agency as something other than monstrous, castrating, defiant bitches” and

finally “access[ing] the chance for a self-definition that is something more than that of traditional patriarchs/husbands and oppressive hierarchies.” (Wester 2012: 191)

Unlike her daughters, Ruth Dead never manages to free herself from the control of the men in her life and get rid of her trauma. An only daughter of a single father, Ruth lived in the Dead house for all her life, first under the control of her father, and after her father’s death she is at the mercy of an abusive husband. Never having had the chance to be independent and forge her own identity, she becomes an insecure and quiet woman, who accepts her fate of submission and smallness that she was conditioned to by the men in her life, as she confides in Milkman after her son follows her on a late night visit to her father’s grave “... because the fact is that I am a small woman. I don’t mean little; I mean small, and I’m small because I was pressed small. I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package.” (SoS 152).

The way that Ruth finds to deal with the trauma in her life is by turning into her incestual tendencies, first towards her father and later as a way of connecting with her son, Milkman, who she breastfeeds until he is too old in an attempt to fulfil her own sexual desires. According to DiPlacidi, Mother-Son incest is “a failure of women to act according to their biological nature as a consequence of social conditions that enable (or force) them unnaturally to work or otherwise abdicate their maternal obligations.” (DiPlacidi 2018 a): 247) Throughout her life, Ruth has trouble telling “love” and “sex” apart. We know little about Ruth’s mother, or if she was present in her life at all. Consequently, Ruth never learns how to be maternal towards her children, so for her the act of breastfeeding is not a nurturing one, but one that provides her with sexual pleasure. Because in Gothic fiction Mother-Son incest is not as common as Father-Daughter incest, sexual love between a mother and son is especially perverse and unnatural

the figure of the mother tends to be characterised in one of two ways: either as overly maternal or non-maternal. Both of these characterisations, in their incestuous incarnations, reflect an extension and conflation of the two functions already present for mothers in the Gothic: that of the nurturing good mother or the sexual bad mother (...) the absent or hyper-present mother is revealed as a figure impossible to ignore and highly disruptive to traditional models of female sexuality and desire. (DiPlacidi 2018 a): 251,252)

Thus, it is this discovery of Ruth's incestual tendency that is at the root of Macon's disgust for his wife after he finds her with her dead father "[i]n the bed. That's where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth." (SoS 91) After this episode, Macon denies Ruth any kind of intimacy, so she feels like she needs to look for it somewhere else. Ruth misses intimacy so much that she fears she might die if she keeps having to live "[w]ith nobody touching me, or even looking as though they'd like to touch me" (SoS 154) At first, she resorts to visiting her father's grave as a way to feel connected to someone, but after her son is born, she uses nursing him as a way to get back her until then unfulfilled sexual life. From his birth, Ruth regards Milkman as "a beautiful toy, a respite, a distraction, a physical pleasure as she nursed him" (SoS 163) and when his life is threatened by Hagar, Ruth's main concern is not that her son might lose his life but rather that her son's death would be "the annihilation of the last occasion she had been made love to." (SoS 165) Making this relationship between Mother and Son even more perverted, when Ruth is spotted by Freddie breastfeeding Milkman, shame is not her first feeling. Instead, she mourns what is the inevitable loss of "half of what made her daily life bearable." (SoS 16)

It is only after he leaves the toxic and oppressive environment of his family and the Dead House that Milkman can finally embark on his journey to search for his identity and a place to belong to, thus becoming the true Gothic hero who escapes the grapple of his tyrant father and incestuous mother. This is what allows him to leave behind his individualistic tendencies, by searching for his past and opening himself up spiritually to the thought of integrating a community.

2 – Haunting Past and Haunting Memory

The living characters in *Song of Solomon* are all, in one way or another, haunted. Some by physical ghosts who serve as spectral guides in their journeys through life, others by memories of the past, and all of them are haunted by a collective trauma that originated in slavery and was carried all the way through to the 20th century in the way of systemic racism. There is no real boundary between the real world and the supernatural realm in the novel, with characters travelling effortlessly through both, often not being able to distinguish from what is real and what is imagined.

In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”, Toni Morrison writes about how in *Song of Solomon* she blends both the real and the otherworldly realms, as there is an “acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other.” in what she explains is demonstrative of “the way in which Black people looked at the world. (...) we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things.” (Morrison 2008: 61) The ghosts in Morrison’s fiction are not the chilling apparitions common in Gothic works, but rather, spiritual guides from the netherworld that help characters by offering them advice and steering them in the right direction. This openness to ghosts that Morrison mentions in her essay is very typical of the African community, and it is not until Milkman accepts the supernatural, and allows the ghosts of his family’s past to guide him through his journey of self-discovery, that he truly becomes a part of his community and discovers his own identity.

It is Circe who gives Milkman the necessary information for him to begin uncovering the truth about his ancestors. Circe was the midwife who delivered both Macon and Pilate, and the one who took them in and hid them in the big mansion where she worked, after their father

Jake was murdered by white men. She is the first person that Milkman asks about when he arrives at his family's town of Danville. After he is driven by Nephew to the farm where Circe used to work, his first impression of the house is of something sinister, a place that "look[ed] like a murderer's house. Dark, ruined, evil." and has a "A hairy animal smell, ripe, rife, suffocating." (SoS 267) It is at this moment that Milkman has his first glimpse of Circe, and his instantly hypnotised

He had had dreams as a child, dreams every child had, of the witch who chased him down dark alleys, between lawn trees, and finally into rooms from which he could not escape. (...) So when he saw the woman at the top of the stairs there was no way for him to resist climbing up toward her outstretched hands, her fingers spread wide for him, her mouth gaping open for him, her eyes devouring him. (SoS 298)

Much like her Greek namesake, Circe is the enchantress that will use her powers to transform Milkman into someone who becomes more open to the unknown and who wants to find a deeper connection to his family's past and ancestry. And like other literary heroes before him, Milkman must first visit the netherworld to get some guidance, before he embarks on his journey.

In *Song of Solomon* Circe acts as the connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and Melanie Anderson goes even further to explain that "She is a physical incarnation of the Dead family's past come to guide Milkman." (Anderson 48) In this way, Circe truly signifies the beginning of Milkman's journey, as she acts as the vehicle through which the past comes into the present, setting Milkman off in the quest to construct his own identity. It is also after his encounter with Circe that Milkman opens his mind to the possibility that the supernatural world can be present in the real world, allowing him to better understand the history of his ancestors, and giving him the ability to fit into his own community, because it is at this point in the novel where the boundaries between dreams and reality become blurred, and the underworld – and by connection the African myth and ancestry - begins seeping into Milkman's life

Milkman struggled for a clear thought, so hard to come by in a dream: Perhaps this woman is Circe. But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was as far as he got, because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead – as a matter of fact, she *had* to be dead. Not because of the wrinkles, and the face so old it could not be alive, but because out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl. (SoS 300)

It is as he further pieces together the stories of his ancestors, after visiting Susan Byrd in Shalimar to learn about his grandparents, that Milkman reaches full acceptance of the connection between his world and the ghostly realm, when he realises that his grandfather Jake truly has been present all along, trying to tell Pilate about her mother

Jesus! Here he was walking around in the middle of the twentieth century trying to explain what a ghost had done. But why not? He thought. One fact was certain: Pilate did not have a navel. Since that was true, anything could be, and why not ghosts as well? (SoS 367)

Although the ghosts of Circe and Jake are presented in the novel as apparitions, another type of ghost present in *Song of Solomon* is depicted as memories. Or rather, as “rememories”, a Toni Morrison concept that I have delineated back in my introduction. Rememories are not only memories from the past that one can remember, they are something that remains in physical form, as pictures, in places and events that one can revisit even in the present. As Sethe explains to her daughter in *Beloved* “Places, places are still there (...) and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.” (Beloved 43) The ghosts in *Song of Solomon* then, are not only the apparitions, but the rememories of a past that is often traumatic and shared collectively by the characters and the community. No characters ever see the ghosts of Solomon and Ryna, yet they are present throughout the book, as their story is passed on through generations through song and the oral tradition. And their story, the myth of the flying African who takes flight and leaves a life of oppression to return home to Africa, is rooted in the painful past of slavery in America.

This search for identity after being dubbed an “other” is at the core of the African American Gothic, that denounces the hauntings of a past that has alienated a whole community. The Gothic provides African American writers the “powerful language through which to speak the unspeakable and a problematic racial discourse that demonizes blackness.” as Goddu so expertly puts it, and at the same time it “can both stereotype the slave as a brutalized victim and provide him the ability to haunt back against the horrors that seek to objectify him.” (Goddu 81) So, Morrison makes the Gothic genre her own, to be able to write about the dark history that haunts African Americans. In her essay collection *The Source of Self-Regard* Morrison describes how black people are not in fact “Others”, but rather they are their own subjects, and they must keep writing their own literature about themselves, so as to have something that counters “raceless” literature, that is not willing to contend with the horrors of the past (Morrison 2019: 170) The American culture has a record of trying to cover or erase the stories of the oppressed, and writers of the African American gothic are trying to fight that, and take a genre that has historically used “dark people” as the scary monsters and in an act of defiance use the Gothic to bring to light the real ghosts – the unimaginable horrors and violence that racism has perpetuated in America. At the same time, by looking back at the past, they are looking to find their own place and identity in a society that has constantly alienated them. According to Wester, they do so because the history that informs contemporary constructions of identity “invents the gothic” (Wester 2012: 29)

Morrison’s goal when she uses rememory and ghosts to expose the horrors of the past is not necessarily to exorcise them, but to bring them to light because they need to be faced for there to be necessary changes in the future. Only when Milkman is exposed to the ghosts of his ancestors, does he realise the oppression and violence that African Americans have suffered as a community, when before he was indifferent to their plight, signalling his journey from someone who is extremely individualistic and does not care about the most serious events that

happen against the African American community - even going as far as saying “Yeah, well, fuck Till. I’m the one in trouble.” (SoS 109) in regard to the horrific murder of Emmet Till - to someone who yearns to be a part of his community and is concerned about the issues that affect his people. Milkman’s eventual integration into his community is crucial for Morrison. Her main concern for her characters, as Beaulieu so clearly puts it “is not only (...) with the relationship between character and ancestor” but also “the connection between character and community” and thus “The ancestral legacies encountered by Morrison’s characters go beyond the return of deceased family members. Her characters may interact with the ancestor as collective history or through ancestral stories.” (Beaulieu 5) In this way, memories and folklore in *Song of Solomon* have the power to heal even the most fragmented of beings into someone who is both spiritually and physically connected to his legacy and his community (Scott 2007: 32)

True to African culture, memories of the past live through generations due to the tradition of storytelling, which is also crucial in keeping a sense of community. This is why Morrison bases the whole of Milkman’s journey on a well-known African folktale of the flying African, and her intention for this character is expressed right from the offset with the epigraph “*The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names.*” By doing so “Morrison calls attention to one of the central themes in all her fiction, the relationship between individual identity and community, for folklore is by definition the expression of community—of the common experiences, beliefs, and values that identify a folk as a group.” (Blake 77) Memory and identity are indissoluble in African American culture, and it is through the past that a sense of self is kept. Milkman’s growth from an individual to someone who is part of a community is constantly punctuated by the stories that the people in his life pass on to him. And it is not until he visits the town from where his family originated that he feels like he has a place in the world. Even when talking to strangers he feels “curious about these people. He didn’t feel close

to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody.” (SoS 365).

The ghosts in *Song of Solomon*, then, are not an example of the dead coming back to haunt the living as a demonstration of the macabre, but something that exists between the past and the present that does not allow for history and memories to die, even if that past is painful. They serve as guides for a community that has been ostracized and must keep a powerful sense of identity and togetherness in order to survive in this world.

3 – Pilate Dead

Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon* represents a mixture between the spiritual and the grotesque. Having been born without a navel to a mother who is dead at the time of the birth, Pilate is ostracized by her community who believes her to be of evil origins. She keeps a piece of paper with her name written on it inside a snuff box that she wears as an earring, to keep a sense of self and of her identity. Unknowingly, she carries the bones of her father, symbolizing the fact that she is the keeper of her family’s history. Pilate is one of Morrison’s most mystical characters, showing supernatural powers, and a deep connection with nature and the otherworld. Of all the characters in the novel, she is the one who, even though she is alienated, is deeply rooted in her community’s traditions and customs.

What mainly defines Pilate as a character in the novel is her lack of a navel, which other characters believe gives her an inhuman quality, especially when this detail is paired with the fact that her mother was dead at the time of her birth, giving others the idea that Pilate had the supernatural ability to give birth to herself. At a young age, Pilate finds herself orphaned, abandoned by her brother, alone in the world, cut off from other people. At the age of twelve

she leaves on a pilgrimage to Virginia, the homeland of her parents, so that she can find a community of people that she can be a part of. It is in the state of New York that she finds a family commune that takes her in and with whom she stays with for three years. It is in this community that Pilate is first confronted with the fact that her lack of navel is a body deformity. Until then, she believed that her smooth stomach was as natural as the anatomical differences between men and women. But her exile from the community in New York gives way to the assumption that she was not born in a natural way, and could not have been a creation of God, but rather something evil. This begins Pilate's lifelong alienation from her black community:

It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people, for, except for the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion. Men frowned, women whispered and shoved their children behind them. (SoS 184)

True to her character, Pilate does not let her ostracization scare her, but fully accepts it, choosing to live an individualistic life, rooted in nature, her ancestry, and African traditions, rather than being a part of a community. She eschews society's norms and comforts for a nomadic life, off the grid, surviving only in the essentials:

When she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair ... Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her... (SoS 184)

Although this deformity is what causes Pilate to live in the margins of society, rejected by the black community, it can be argued that her lack of navel is the reason for her deep connection to an African past and ancestry, and the source of her supernatural powers. As Barbara Rigney explains, Pilate is one of Morrison's characters to be defined by "a series of marks, brands, or emblems" that "symbolize their participation in a greater entity, whether that is community or race or both. The marks are hieroglyphs, clues to a culture and a history more than to individual personality." (Rigney 39) Indeed, it is only her removal from general society that forces her to focus on what is essential, thus allowing her to navigate effortlessly between the real world and the otherworld. Much like the flying African, who leaves slavery behind to fly back to his

homeland in Africa, Pilate too flies away from a community that does not share her values and roots herself in her African ancestry and folklore. As Milkman concludes at the end of the novel “Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly.” (SoS 419)

Another aspect that characterizes Pilate is her superhuman ability to love selflessly. She ends her twenty-year journey across the country and returns to Mississippi to provide her granddaughter Hagar with a stable home. As well as being a mother and grandmother to Reba and Hagar, she also serves as Milkman’s surrogate mother and guide, in what is reminiscent of Eve, the first woman and maternal ancestor to the whole world, who curiously also did not have a navel. Every relationship that she has with other characters in the book is a nurturing one, and she is willing to do anything to protect those she loves. This maternal instinct is so strong in Pilate, that as she is dying, she only has one wish “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more.” (SoS 418)

Despite her nurturing nature, a trait often associated with the feminine, Pilate is quite a masculine female character. This is not only because of her appearance (she is described as being as tall as Milkman, strong and imposing, with a short haircut and wearing masculine items of clothing) but also because she is the only woman in the novel who does not let her life be dependent on men, nor does she let herself be oppressed by a patriarchal society. Instead, she chooses to live on the outskirts of their Michigan town, in an uncommon household only made up of women. In the Gothic, this blurring of male and female characteristics in one character was often employed to write in a macabre character, but it was also the first genre to push those limits. Horner and Zlosnik discuss this in their essay, describing how the Gothic has always carried a “preoccupation with boundaries and their transgression or permeability has always extended to the demarcations of gender identity” and thus “the Gothic text frequently queries the social construction of gender and undermines its certainties (...) to deconstruct the social “givens” of masculinity and femininity.” (Horner

and Zlosnik 56) Much like Morrison blurs the lines between the real and the unreal with Pilate, she also blurs gender lines, which gives Pilate the ability to easily navigate the world, free of control, and able to shapeshift and adapt to the situations she finds herself in.

Having rejected the idea of being with a man due to her lack of navel, Pilate has not had any male control since her father's death and after her and Macon parted ways, allowing her to live her life as she wants, unlike the other women of the black community. At the same time, although she has a great ability to love everyone, this is a maternal love, not a romantic, obsessive love for a man such as that of Hagar. Further, as bootlegger and the only source of alcohol in the town, a lot of men depend on her to get what they want. It is no doubt then that Macon identifies her as being a "no good. She's a snake, and can charm you like a snake, but still a snake." (SoS 67) This male vision of Pilate as a snake comes in direct contrast with her nurturing nature that positions her as Eve, because she represents the resistance to a patriarchal control, and challenges society's norms. As mentioned in Part One of this chapter, Gothic narratives commonly have a male character as the villain, often the patriarch who exerts his control over the lives, bodies, and thoughts of other characters, usually women. In the Gothic, however, women can become the villains "when they defy masculine control [as] the gothic affirms dominant patriarchal ideologies of heteronormativity, especially as defined by marriages" (Wester 2012: 203) In this way, if we look at *Song of Solomon* through the lens of the masculine Gothic, where the "woman is always on the verge (...) of appearing unnatural" resulting in "a misogyny generally expressed as woman's monstrous otherness" (Miles 81,82), Pilate stands as the villain of the narrative, because she keeps her autonomy and individualism.

Furthering her grotesqueness, when other characters describe Pilate's physical attributes and mannerisms, they are almost always related to nature. Upon his first visit to her house, Milkman is instantly taken aback by "this lady who had one earring, no navel, and

looked like a tall black tree.” (SoS 48), and throughout the novel we read about her pebbly voice, her dark, berry-coloured lips, and the scent of pine and forest that trails behind her. This is, of course, a symbol of her deep rootedness in nature, but at the same time, it is a depiction of her grotesqueness. As mentioned in my introduction, Kayser considers “the monstrous fusion of human and nonhuman elements as the most typical feature of the grotesque style” (Kayser 24) Much like the architects and painters, who used the melding of human bodies and natural elements to illustrate the subversive nature of the grotesque, Morrison instills Pilate with these elements of nature to depict her “otherness” and her otherworldly-ness, as well as to illustrate the subversive life that she has chosen to live within society.

Deriving from these natural characteristics, her connection to her African ancestry, and her acceptance of the supernatural, Pilate is imbued with some special gifts, notably, her superhuman powers. Together with Circe, she is Milkman’s spiritual guide in the real world, she is a sorceress and a healer, and, much like nature throughout the seasons, she has the ability to shapeshift. Others respect her powers, and believe that they derive from her lack of navel, and they know her “to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga – all on account of the fact that she had no navel.” (SoS 116) When Macon refuses to make love to Ruth and give her another child, she resorts to asking for Pilate’s help, who concocts love potions and gives use to her skills in the art of voodoo, successfully impregnating Ruth and impeding Macon from having her abort their child. As Waller-Peterson explains, this is another way that Morrison has of making Pilate defy society’s patriarchal norms, as her acts of supporting and healing other women are the way in which “Morrison employs and subverts Gothic tropes to explore the ways in which female bodies that seek this type of healing are Othered by threatened patriarchal structures.” (Waller-Peterson 147)

Milkman witnesses the extent of Pilate's powers at the police station, when him and Guitar are arrested for attempting to steal what they think is Pilate's bag of gold. In what is derogatively dubbed as her "Aunt Jemima act" (SoS 260), Pilate appears to have the ability to change her physical appearance in order to appease a white police officer:

Pilate *had* been shorter. As she stood there in the receiving room of the jail, she didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulder – and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own chin. But Pilate was as tall as he was. When she whined to the policeman, verifying Milkman and Guitar's lie that they had ripped off the sack as a joke on an old lady, she had to look up at him. And her hands were shaking as she described how she didn't know the sack was gone until the officer woke her up; that she couldn't imagine why anybody would want to run off with her husband's bones. (SoS 256)

However, as soon as they are in the car going back home, she returns to her tall, imponent presence, and her voice becomes raspy and strong again. One can argue that in this episode of the novel Pilate does not truly change her appearance, but rather plays on the perception of the white police officer regarding her as a simple, weak, black woman, something that many African Americans have to go through. Notwithstanding, I believe that this is another way in which Morrison plays with blurring the lines between the real and the unreal, and the capacity of African Americans to tap into their ancestry and beliefs to bring the supernatural into the real world. Although Milkman and Guitar see what they perceive as her submission to a white man as something embarrassing and out of character for Pilate, her shapeshifting is actually a power that has proved crucial for African Americans throughout history, who have had to adapt to the norms of white society at times in order to survive³, she resorts to her shapeshifting abilities out of necessity, as explained by Marshall "Pilate slips into the shapes and forms that society recognizes when it suits her purpose, as an actress slips into a role. More precisely, she acts out the perceptions or expectations of others" (Marshall 487) While Pilate, because of her

³ This is, of course, reminiscent of the issue of Passing in the African American community, where black people would try to disguise their racial identity in order to be accepted in the mainstream white society.

travels and life experience, understands that Milkman and Guitar are still too naïve to realise what is at stake.

Pilate Dead stands as one of Toni Morrison's most grotesque and multifaceted characters, carrying many duties with her. She represents the physical embodiment of the spectral figures in the novel, acting as the guardian for her family's history and ancestry. Her true purpose is to keep the past, ghosts, and traditions alive, and pass these down through other generations, namely onto Milkman. Existing between the two realms of the real and the unreal, she not only lives outside of society but also defies the laws of nature.

Conclusion

Much like the slave writers who paved the way for her, Toni Morrison appropriates tropes of the Gothic and the grotesque as the devices that allow her to accurately represent the horrors that African Americans have had to endure since their arrival in America. By exposing the reality of being Black in America through the appropriation of the Gothic genre, Morrison protests the depiction of Africans as monsters, and instead creates novels where they are humanised. In her words, her use of the grotesque as a device intends to evoke an emotional response in her reader (Morrison and Taylor-Guthrie 97) and thus she subverts literary conventions to denounce the issue of white sovereignty.

In both novels analysed in this dissertation, the Gothic is depicted in the horrors systematised by a dominating society that ostracizes Black people. Characters are haunted by patriarchal structures and systemic racism, abjected by others and by their own communities when they do not fit into western standards of what is acceptable or normal. This is especially clear in the characters of Pecola, Cholly, Pauline, and Pilate, who find themselves “othered”, even demonised, because of their physical differences.

Pilate, even though she is a grotesque character, distinguishes herself from the other characters in both novels because she does not let herself be dominated by established norms, choosing instead to live in the margins, deeply connected with her ancestry. Milkman too becomes the Gothic hero when he learns to live like Pilate, freeing himself from the shackles of a tyrant father, and eschewing the rules of a dominating capitalist society to root himself in the history and traditions of his family. *Song of Solomon* stands as one of Morrison’s most Gothic works, by depicting some of the genre’s traditional tropes – such as the claustrophobic patriarchal home, the oppression of female characters, and psychological violence – and by blurring the lines between the real and the unreal, as she focuses on the African spiritual tradition, and connection with the otherworldly and the supernatural.

Ghosts in the works of Toni Morrison, and, specifically in this dissertation, in *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye*, are not always physical spectral beings, but rather represent memories of a violent past, for the characters and for the African American community as a whole. Rememories come back to haunt characters to remember that confronting past traumas is the only way to keep a keen sense of one's self, allowing them to move forward away from the pain, while never forgetting it.

The catastrophic consequences of not confronting past traumas, communal and individual, are well delineated in *The Bluest Eye*. The African American community in the novel refuses to reflect on the pain that racism has caused on their people as a whole, and thus inflict that pain on a little girl, Pecola, inevitably leading her into madness and misery. Pauline and Cholly, too, refuse to work on their traumas, ending up victimising their own daughter even further. The first by rejecting her, like everyone else, as Pecola does not match her beauty standards, and the latter by inflicting on little Pecola the most grotesque form of abuse there is. The decrepit living situation of the Breedloves, as well as the tragic ending of the book, where we see a young Pecola losing the child that her own father impregnates her with, symbolise the effects of racism in the African American family unit.

By subverting the use of the Gothic and grotesque, Toni Morrison uncovers the dangers of a hegemonic society that "others" an entire race, delineating those repercussions in the way she depicts the tragic and difficult lives of her characters. While exposing how grotesque and brutal the real world can truly be for Black people, she urges her readers to not only be moved by her novels, but to feel inspired to take action.

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