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Sexual Violence in Selected Works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Sapphire

Sexuální násilí ve vybraných dílech Alice Walker, Toni Morrison a Sapphire

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Poděkování

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on three works of African-American female writers: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Sapphire's *Push.* The primary topic of my analysis is sexual violence, or more specifically, child sexual abuse and the trauma resulting from it. Each selected novel has a protagonist who is a victim of sexual abuse and/or rape. Their victimhood plays a significant role in their psychologies, relationships, development, and their (in)ability to live a "normal" life.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. In the introduction, I explain why these aforementioned works are suitable for comparison. What follows is a brief introduction to the topic of child sexual abuse and the trauma which results from it. I also present the theoretical literature I use to support my claims in the upcoming chapters. In addition, I briefly define the terms "happy ending," "realistic ending," and "tragic ending."

The first analytic chapter studies the character of Celie in *The Color Purple*. It follows her development from a fourteen-year-old uneducated victim, to the fully formed independent survivor she becomes. Even though Celie is the only character that is serially victimized, by both her stepfather and her husband, Celie's story is one of hope. Through her abusive marriage to Albert, Celie meets and falls in love with Shug, who becomes her partner. Shug, in addition to Celie's sister Nettie, constitutes Celie's primary support. It is thanks to their unconditional love and encouragement that Celie can liberate herself from the life of abuse she has experienced. *The Color Purple* concludes in a happy ending.

The second chapter analyzes the character of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola's story is unique in the aspect of her voicelessness. Claudia, her friend, is the main narrator of Pecola's life story. As I examine in this thesis, Morrison made a deliberate choice to convey how Pecola is robbed of her perspective. Pecola's trauma is multiplied by the countless adversative events of her childhood. From her father's alcoholism and incarceration, her mother's role as Pecola's co-abuser, to Pecola's miscarriage and final disintegration of her psyche, *The Bluest Eye* presents Pecola with a tragic ending.

The third chapter discusses the evolution of Precious in *Push*. The story of Precious differs from its predecessors in various aspects. It is the most recent novel of the three, this gives it a very present and relevant feeling. Compared to Walker and Morrison, Sapphire chose the most brutal and vicious depiction of child sexual abuse. *Push* is also gifted with an overwhelming sense of realness of the story. Precious is abused from the age of two by both

her father and mother, at the age of sixteen she is pregnant for the second time and illiterate, yet, once she receives education and support from her teacher, and friends with similar life experiences, she embarks on a journey of recovery. Precious's bleak HIV diagnosis combined with her vigorous determination to heal makes the conclusion to her story a realistic ending.

The comparative chapter provides a comprehensive assessment of all three novels in relation to one another. This includes comparing the characters' individual journeys and integral psychological developments, as well as their communities and the individuals in their lives that have the power to influence their lives for better or for worse. This chapter also focuses on the literary choices of the authors and the effects they have on the evolution of the story itself.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I summarize the points I made in the previous chapters. With an emphasis on the effect and consequences these works have had on both the literary world and the survivorship community which often seeks refuge in the pages of these books.

Keywords: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Sapphire, *The Color Purple*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Push*, child sexual abuse, rape, Afro-American literature

ABSTRAKT

Tato práce se soustředí na díla tří afroamerických spisovatelek: *Velmi modré oči* od Toni Morrison, *Barva nachu* od Alice Walker a *Push* od Sapphire. Hlavním tématem mé analýzy je sexuální násilí, specifičtěji sexuální zneužívání dětí a trauma z něho vyplývající. V každém z vybraných románů vystupuje protagonistka, která je obětí sexuálního zneužívání a/nebo znásilnění. Skutečnost, že jsou oběťmi sexuálního násilí, hraje významnou roli v jejich psychice, vztazích, rozvoji a jejich (ne)schopnosti žít „normální" život.

Tato práce je rozdělena do šesti kapitol. V úvodu vysvětluji, proč jsou již zmíněná díla vhodná ke srovnání. Následuje krátký úvod do tématiky sexuálního zneužívání dětí a traumatu, které je jeho výsledkem. Také představím odbornou literaturu, kterou používám k podpoření svých tvrzení v následujících kapitolách. Navíc stručně definuji termíny „šťastný konec," „realistický konec," a „tragický konec."

První analytická kapitola studuje postavu Celie v *Barvě nachu*. Sleduje její vývoj od čtrnáctileté nevzdělané oběti do plně utvořené nezávislé přeživší, jíž se stane. I přes skutečnost, že Celie je jedinou analyzovanou postavou, která je sériově viktimizována, jak svým otčímem, tak svým manželem, Celiin příběh je plný naděje. I přes všechno násilí, které podstoupí v rukou svého tyranského manžela, Celie potká a zamiluje se do Shug, která se stane její partnerkou. Shug spolu se Celiinou sestrou Nettie jsou pro Celie hlavní oporou. Díky jejich bezpodmínečné lásce a podpoře je Celie schopná se vymanit ze života plného zneužívání. *Barva nachu* je uzavřena šťastným koncem.

Druhá kapitola analyzuje postavu Pecoly ve *Velmi modrých očích*. Pecolin příběh je unikátní proto, že nikdy nespatříme Pecolinu perspektivu. Claudia, její kamarádka, je hlavním vypravěčem Pecolina životního příběhu. Jak zkoumám v této práci, Morrison se úmyslně rozhodla sdělit, jak byla Pecola připravena o vlastní perspektivu. Pecolino trauma je znásobené nespočetnými adverzativními událostmi v jejím dětství. Počínaje alkoholismem a uvězněním jejího otce, rolí její matky, jakožto spoluúčastníka na jejím týrání, až po Pecolin potrat a finální dezintegraci jejího psychického zdraví. *Velmi modré oči* ústí v Pecolin tragický konec.

Třetí kapitola projednává evoluci Precious v *Push*. Příběh Precious se liší od svých předchůdců v mnoha ohledech. Je tím novějším ze všech tří, tato kvalita mu dává velmi přítomný a relevantní pocit. V porovnání s Walker a Morrison, Sapphire zvolila to nejbrutálnější a nejkrutější vylíčení sexuálního zneužívání dětí. *Push* je také obdarován ohromujícím pocitem opravdovosti celého příběhu. Precious je zneužívána od věku dvou let,

jak svým otcem, tak svou matkou, ve věku šestnácti let je podruhé těhotná a stále negramotná. Přesto ve chvíli, kdy se jí dostane vzdělání a podpory od její učitelky a přátel s podobnými životními zkušenostmi, vydá se na cestu, která vede k zotavení. Bezútěšná diagnóza HIV pozitivity, kterou Precious obdrží, v kombinaci se silným odhodláním se uzdravit dává jejímu příběhu realistický konec.

Komparativní kapitola poskytuje ucelený posudek všech třech románů v souvislostech jednoho ke druhému. To zahrnuje srovnání cest jednotlivých postav a jejich integrálního psychologického vývoje, spolu se srovnáním jejich komunit a jednotlivců v jejich životech, kteří mají moc pozitivně i negativně ovlivnit jejich existenci. Tato kapitola se také soustředí na literární volby spisovatelek jejich následky na evoluci samotných příběhů.

V závěru této práce shrnu body, které jsem rozvedla v předchozích kapitolách. S důrazem na následky a důsledky těchto děl, jak na literární svět, tak na komunitu přeživších, která často hledá útočiště ve stránkách těchto knih.

Klíčová slova: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Sapphire, *Barva nachu*, *Velmi modré oči*, *Push*, sexuální zneužívání dětí, znásilnění, afroamerická literatura

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INTRODUCTION

As has been well established in the literary world, the works chosen for this thesis are among the highest literary achievements by African-American writers in the late 20th century. *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. It was written by Toni Morrison, who was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Nobel Prize in Literature for her literary work. The story of *The Bluest Eye* is set in 1941 in Lorain, Ohio. It tells the story of Pecola, a young African-American girl growing up in the period following The Great Depression.

The Color Purple was published in 1982. It was written by Alice Walker, and awarded both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction. The story of *The Color Purple* is set in early 1900s in the Southern United States. It tells the story of Celie, a young uneducated African-American girl growing up in poverty.

Push was published in 1996 and it was written by Sapphire. The story of Push is set in 1980s Harlem. It tells the story of Precious, an obese illiterate African-American girl. All three novels deal with the issues of racism, sexism, child sexual abuse and many others.

These works are particularly suitable for comparative analysis because of both their apparent similarity and striking differences in their narratives. In both their years of publication, as well as the temporal and geographical settings of their stories, they span significant time and space. I have chosen these specific novels because they portray the subject of child sexual abuse with the nuance and authenticity it deserves. As I examine, though fiction, these stories are incredibly truthful in their portrayal of the experiences of victims and survivors of sexual abuse. There are many important factors that play a role in the development and outcome of the heroines' stories. The crucial ones are community, family, the mother and father figures, support system, and the process of healing.

This thesis aims to connect these three works through their similarities, while contrasting all the different authorial narrative choices which make them unique. Despite the characteristics that can be attributed to each story, the circumstances of each character's abuse, along with its development evolve into individualized narratives that could not be further from one another. Their analysis may offer the divergent forms the topic of child sexual abuse may take in individuals' stories.

THE TRAUMA OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

I have chosen the topic of child sexual abuse as the subject of my thesis because it is a subject matter that is not discussed nearly enough. Especially if one considers the hitherto prevalence of this crime in our society. Sexual abuse of a child is one of the most heinous crimes anyone can commit. Therefore, it is no wonder that the general public, notably individuals who have not been affected by this issue, have no desire to acknowledge its existence, let alone discuss it in depth. Alas, given the pervasiveness of this matter, it is crucial that we as a society stand by the children and adults who have experienced sexual abuse.

I have been interested in the problematic of child sexual abuse for quite some time. As a result of this interest, I have been studying this topic for over four years. I possess an excess of knowledge concerning child sexual abuse. In spite of this, I cite every claim regarding the victimology, psychology, medical research, and trauma theory of child sexual abuse, so that it were not dismissed as the claims of one, but rather so that it were acknowledged as the scientific consensus it is.

All the scientific literature I use in this thesis is cited in the bibliography. The main titles are *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing* by Christopher Bagley, and Kathleen King, *Father-Daughter Incest* and *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman, and *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* by Pete Walker.

All the above-mentioned literature covers the wide spectrum of sexual abuse issues: from prevention, stress responses, early signs of trauma, the short-term and long-term effects of trauma, to recovery. Child sexual abuse can happen to anyone and can be perpetrated by anyone. That said, it is true that "as many as 93 percent of victims under the age of 18 know their abuser."[1] Children are also the most vulnerable and targeted as "nearly 70 percent of all reported sexual assaults (including assaults on adults) occur to children ages 17 and under."[2]

Sexual abuse can lead to the development of PTSD or CPTSD. The effects or symptoms of PTSD can be psychological or physical (psychosomatic). Among the most common psychological symptoms are "intrusive memories or flashbacks, emotional numbness, sleep disturbances, anxiety, intense guilt, sadness, irritability, outbursts of anger, and dissociative

[1] "Child Sexual Abuse," *rainn.org,* Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), 2015, <https://www.rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse> 25 June 2022.
[2] "Child Sexual Abuse Statistics," *d2l.org*, Darkness to Light, <https://www.d2l.org/child-sexual-abuse/statistics/> 21 July 2022.

experiences."[3] Among the most common physical symptoms are "increased blood pressure and heart rate, fatigue, muscle tension, nausea, joint paint, headaches, back pain or other types of pain."[4]

Stories are one thing that can significantly aid survivors in their recovery. This is one of the main reasons why I chose to analyze these literary works under the scope of child sexual abuse. These novels are incredibly useful in familiarizing the general public with this heavy subject under the disguise of fiction. They are also immensely beneficial for the survivorship community.

HAPPY/REALISTIC/TRAGIC ENDING

Stories can conclude in a plethora of diverse outcomes. For purposes of this thesis, with the help of dictionary definitions, I explain how I came to the conclusion of using these three terms for each narratological end.

Cambridge dictionary defines happy ending as "the ending of a story or series of events in which the people involved are happy or all problems are solved."[5] My understanding of this term is identical to this definition. As such, there is only one narrative that fits this definition – the story of *The Color Purple*. Celie, along with most characters present at the end of the novel, receive a happy ending. For example, Celie is in a loving relationship with Shug, she is reunited with her children and her sister, she is financially secure as she owns her pants-making business, she is also a trusted member of her community who aids others, such as Albert, Harpo, and Sophia to live their best lives. As I analyze and explain in the upcoming chapters, she is happy, and all her problems are solved at the end of her story.

Cambridge dictionary defines the term tragic as "very sad, often involving death and suffering."[6] In my definition, I stress the emphasis on suffering and added lack of hope that a given situation will or can get better. As such, *The Bluest Eye* is the narrative that fits this definition. Pecola's story is hinted on as possessing the characteristics of tragedy from the very

[3] "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *psychologytoday.com*, Psychology Today, November 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder> 21 July 2022.
[4] Spencer Eth, "Expert Q&A: Postraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)," *Psychiatry.org,* American Psychiatric Association, October 2020, <https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/expert-q-and-a> 20 July 2022.
[5] "Definition of happy ending," *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*, Cambridge University Press, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/happy-ending> 25 June 2022.
[6] "Definition of tragic," *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*, Cambridge University Press, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tragic> 25 June 2022.

beginning of the novel. Her environment and community's treatment of her only progressively worsens over time. The more abuse Pecola suffers, the less hope there is that her life can result in anything but a tragedy. Hence the end of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is impregnated by her father, as a result of her pregnancy, she is expelled from school, and shunned by everyone in her community. When she confides in her mother about the rape she has suffered at the hands of her father, her mother beats her savagely. Pecola loses the baby and subsequently loses her mind. As I analyze and explain in the upcoming chapters, if anyone's end could be described as tragic, it is Pecola's.

Cambridge dictionary defines the term realistic as "having or showing a practical awareness of things as they are."[7] I broaden this definition by focusing specifically on the issue of child sexual abuse. There is a certain set of expectations which are realistic to have for a survivor of child sexual abuse. A never-ending dichotomy of hope and despair. Such as - it is possible to heal, but never completely. It is possible to free yourself from the abuse, but not its effects. Complex traumatization, which naturally comes with survivorship of child sexual abuse, entails a lifelong healing process that is never quite finished. In this respect, the narrative of *Push* fits this definition perfectly. Precious is a survivor who was able to escape her abusers, take control of her life, begin to heal, yet she is HIV positive at a time when such a diagnosis means a death sentence, all the while suffering with the effects of CPTSD. As I analyze and explain in the upcoming chapters, for anyone in Precious's position, her story's ending would be recognized as realistic.

Due to the plethora of diverse ways these three stories conclude in, I have felt the need to precisely define what is meant by these terms. Nevertheless, this does not mean that I will further study the issue of endings in depth, or focus on it specifically, irrespective of the stories discussed. In addition, these definitions are also used as a tool to help determine not only the diverse endings, but also their diverse developments throughout which it becomes clear which direction these stories are moving.

[7] "Definition of realistic," *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/realistic> 25 June 2022.

THE COLOR PURPLE

The Color Purple is a multifaceted story of an impoverished young girl's experiences. From her childhood sexual trauma to the continued abuse committed by her husband, Celie has endured much torment and misery. The novel's core theme is change and the many aspects that come with it. Through her recovery, Celie discovers her voice, which has been restricted to written form of expression for the majority of her life, and masters its use. Celie's lived trauma has been substantial, thus eliciting the need for a journey of healing. That is not to say that her life is solely filled with evil, the course of her life consists of good and evil in equal measure. One might even say that good not only wins out, but almost erases the harm she has suffered. Through her comradery with important women in her life, such as Sophie, and the support that her life-altering relationship with Shug provides, Celie has redefined her selfhood and directed the course of her life to be one of not tragedy, but happiness and contentment.

Alice Walker has been no stranger to solitude and loneliness, due to a scar she suffered at the age of eight, she became a victim of bullying. Along with her activism and early life experiences of pregnancy and suicidal thoughts, Walker has gone through a specifically useful set of circumstances to aid her in the exploration of a maltreated character such as Celie. Walker is invested in the story of Afro-American people, her people, and in particular black women, both in their plights and in their triumphs.[8]

Alice Walker "entered Spelman College, and in her sophomore year was spiritually reborn as an activist in the Georgia voter registration movement of SNCC."[9] As Bernard Bell writes:

> In the summer of 1965 she traveled to East Africa, returning to college pregnant, sick, alone, and suicidal. It was during this crisis in the winter of 1965 that she completed in one week most of the poems in *Once,* her first book of poetry, which was not published until 1968 when the women's movement began displacing the black power movement in the social arena.[10]

In her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Walker focuses on generational trauma and the sensitive topic of violence in the black community. *Meridian* (1976) is Walker's second novel. "Although more middle class and less physically violent, the black men of the

[8] Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989, 259.
[9] Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, 259.
[10] Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, 259.

1960s in Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, are, with the exception of the father, similarly disloyal and despicable in their abuse of women."[11] Walker's third Pulitzer-awarded novel *The Color Purple* (1982) has become the most popular of her works. The novel has received a great amount of critical responses, from some expressing gratitude for its critical role in bringing the debate about black feminism to the mainstream discourse, to severe criticism of Walker's portrayal of black men and its potential aid in spreading the racist myth of black men as inherently violent. *The Temple of My Familiar* explores themes of sexuality and liberation through the lens of multiple narratives. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* uses the same multiple narratives technique and tells the story of a previously introduced character Tashi and her struggle with identity amidst the different western and African cultures. *By the Light of My Father's Smile* explores female sexuality and questions the role fatherhood has on one's daughters. *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* is a story of two middle-aged lovers, a man and a woman, who conduct a spiritual journey. Her oeuvre also includes collections of short stories such as *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories* (1982).

As Bell writes, "the class and political struggle explored in Walker's novels is primarily sexual."[12] This is true for all of Walker's novels, but it is crucial in *The Color Purple*. Both gender and sex are important driving factors of the novel. Gender is a strong indicator of one's status, power, options and, to a certain extent, predetermined future. Through the book, it is clear whether someone is a man or a woman by another individual's treatment. If we were to define sex, or rather sexual intercourse or contact, as not inherently consensual or nonconsensual, its exemplified usage varies throughout the book. Sex is an ambiguously marked tool, whose use depends solely on its proprietor. Once this is firmly established, sexual assault, its resulting trauma and subsequent recovery are undoubtedly the novel's upmost prevailing themes.

The Color Purple is a story of a fourteen-year-old black girl who finds herself in a helpless situation. Celie has just been raped by Pa, her father (or rather stepfather, whom she presumes to be her father at this point of the story) and is, understandably so, confused and lost. Celie is also under a direct threat that terrifies her into submission. As K. Cheung writes, "it is not the male offender but the female victim who suffers the penalty for an illicit affair: he

[11] Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, 261-262.
[12] Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, 260.

sentences her to hold her tongue."[13] Given the clear prohibition of her expression about the afore-mentioned act: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy"[14]; she behaves in the only way she has been permitted to, she writes her first letter to God.

In this first correspondence, she begins telling her story by reaching out for help, to the only being available to her. By pleading for a sign from God, what she desperately wants in that moment is clarity, she needs an explanation of what has happened to her and why. What brings her to this one-sided correspondence with God, her being violated by Pa, "becomes not an instrument of silencing, but the catalyst to Celie's search for voice."[15] The second question seems to be particularly important to her because she is or at least has been a good person and therefore she cannot comprehend why this horrible thing has happened to her. To find an answer to that question, she provides God with some background information.

Her mother had just given birth to her brother, she was weak and sick, and did not want to or was not able to be sexually active with him. Once she left to see a doctor, previously telling Celie to take care of the other children, he brutally raped her. He threatened her and told her: "You better shut up and git used to it." (3) In the next sentence, she confesses she never did, implying that it has happened repeatedly. She now experiences the first effects of her lived trauma, she has nausea when she is the one to cook. The symptom of nausea is closely connected and has a causal link to eating disorders, which Celie constantly being described as small and skinny potentially suffers from as well.[16]

Next, we learn that her mother died. It was violent, she screamed and cursed at her because she was already pregnant with her second child. She asked her about the first child, Celie said it was God's, she did not know any other man or what to say. Nobody came to see them, Celie was isolated, alone. Fortunately, Pa's coordinated attempt to isolate[17] and silence Celie in the aftermath of his crime has an unexpected outcome. As Martha J. Cutter writes: "In Walker's text rape leads not to erasure, but rather to the start of a prolonged struggle toward subjectivity and voice."[18] Her mother asked what happened to the child: "I say God took it. He

[13] K. Cheung, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*," *PMLA* 103, no. 2 (1988): 163.
[14] Alice, Walker, *The Color Purple*, Orion Books LTD, 2017, 3. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated in the text by parentheses.
[15] Martha J. Cutter, "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*," *MELUS* 25, no. 3-4 (2000): 166.
[16] Christopher Bagley and Kathleen King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing,* Routledge, 2003, 78-80.
[17] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* Basic Books, 1992, 122.
[18] Cutter, "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*," 167.

took it." (4) She thinks Pa took the child and killed it in the woods. Understandably, she is worried that he will kill her second child, too. Pa's behavior towards her progressively worsens. He, just like his rape, demonizes her, dehumanizes her, belittles her.[19] Through his repugnant treatment of her, he attempts to transfer his guilt and shame onto her.

Celie now believes that he did not kill her child, but that he sold it, just like the second one. She hopes that he will marry someone soon because she is worried that he will victimize her sister as well. Pa gets married, and seemingly, the sexual abuse stops for the time being. Nettie has got a boyfriend, Mr. ____. At first, Celie disapproves of this relationship, but because Pa still seems to be interested in violating Nettie, she changes her mind and tells her: "Marry him, Nettie, an try to have one good year out your life." (7) After that, Celie presumes, Nettie would get pregnant.

The thought of pregnancy brings her to the impossibility of her getting pregnant ever again. She no longer menstruates and thus cannot conceive another child. This is the first permanent physical effect of her being raped by her stepfather. Infertility as a possible result of sexual trauma or sexually transmitted infections is a common symptom of child sexual abuse.[20] He took away her choice to willingly bear children in the future, robbing her of consensual motherhood, in the process of stealing so many other things temporarily.

He beats her for winking at a boy in church, reinstating his sense of ownership over her. Celie did not wink at a boy because she does not even look at them. In Celie's words: "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them." (7) She explains that people might think it strange given her mother's emotionally abusive treatment of her, but she says she felt sorry for her mother and did not blame her for treating her maliciously. She feels guilt over her death as she believes it was Pa's story that killed her. The story of Celie getting pregnant because of her sexual promiscuity, which could not be further from the truth. As Roshnavand writes: "Celie's guilt-stricken response to the incident is quite typical of a woman rape victim."[21] Celie's guilt even prohibits her from feeling negatively towards her mother who could be seen as a co-abuser or in the very least a complacent a partially blamable person. Whether it were the fear of men or some other reason, Celie expresses her interest in women for the first time. At this point, this first sign of lesbianism is fully platonic

[19] Steven C. Walker, "Rape as Literary Theme," *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2019, 2.
[20] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 119.
[21] Farshid Nowrouzi Roshnavand, "Rape as Catalyst to Epistolary Discourse and Womanist Bonding: Alice Walker's Reconstructive Strategy in *The Color Purple*," *Logos et Littera: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Text* 3, no. 5 (2018): 32.

and shrouded in a rationalized reasoning of her paying attention to other women because of her experienced abuse. This argument of course does not stand, as Celie undermines it in admittance of her verbal abuse by her mother.

Mr. ____ asks to marry Nettie, but Pa will not let her due to many reasons including a scandal with a woman called Shug Avery. Celie's stepmother finds a picture of Shug and Celie develops her first crush. She thinks Shug is incredibly beautiful, she carries her photo around, sleeps with it and dreams of her. At this point Celie's lesbianism is apparent and could be argued as more than just platonic, given her appreciation for Shug's beauty. Through her developing feelings for Shug, Celie embarks on the journey of self-acceptance and her letters become more than just confessions of a crime committed against her and consequently attached psychological turmoil inside of her.[22]

Due to her continues fear of Pa abusing Nettie, Celie takes it upon herself to protect her from him. She tells him to rape her instead while his new wife is sick. He acts confused either to presume his innocence or due to him believing his own delusions. She dresses up for him, he calls her trampy, beats her, but rapes her anyway. This exemplifies that rape is not an act of passion, but of power. Her stepfather does not merely need to fulfill his sexual need, but rather subdue her once more, as she is exhibiting a sense of agency after discontinuity of the abuse.[23]

After this event, Nettie and her stepmother both become aware of the abuse and it is safe to say that they are both distraught. Mr. ____ comes one night, Celie is crying in her room, her stepmother as well, Nettie is scared, goes out and vomits. The two men talk about Mr. ____'s proposal, but no matter the amount of manipulation from Mr. ____, Pa does not budge. He offers Celie instead, assuring him that she would be a more suitable alternative as a replacement for his children's mother. He tells Mr. ____: "She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice." (9) With this statement, he exhibits power and pride in what he had done to her, what he had taken from her and how he had ruined her, while simultaneously stripping her of her worth and dignity. He describes her as ugly and stupid. He tells him she cannot get pregnant, thus describing her as the perfect (sex) slave. However, he tells him that he must watch her, or she will get everything of his away and that she tells lies. Hence destroying her credibility, he takes away any opportunity for her truth to be heard and respected. He presents her as cattle for sale and offers an actual cow as a bonus. Rape was historically first

[22] Walid El. Hamamsy, "Epistolary Memory: Revisiting Women's Writing," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 30 (2010): 155.
[23] Walker, "Rape as Literary Theme," 3.

and foremost viewed as a crime against the men and their property as it was seen to devalue their possession.[24] Therefore, Pa in his position of "father" and rapist gets to experience enhanced sense of power over Celie as he is the one who "ruined" his own property simply because he could. This power trip is exaggerated by his continuous devaluation and degradation of Celie and her truth.

Celie wants to be educated in order to get away from Pa and run away with her sister. She recalls a memory of her going to school, how much she liked to learn and how she was not stupid like Pa says. "I learned all about Columbus in first grade, but look like he the first thing I forgot." (11) Through this letter she expresses her memory problems and having trouble concentrating, more signs of trauma effecting her development and cognitive functions.[25] When she got pregnant for the first time, Pa took her out of school. He reasoned it was because of her intellect, but more probably he did it to isolate Celie from the outside world so she could not reach out for help and incriminate him by telling the truth. Also by restricting her education, he could further control her way of thinking, further propagate his influence over her, and diminish her independence, freedom of thought and freedom in general.[26] Their teacher came to their home to plead for Celie, but once she saw she was pregnant, she just left. Celie and Nettie did not understand, did not even know that Celie was pregnant, shows nicely their innocence as children. Mr. ____ reconsiders, comes to their house and after reassuring himself that the cow is still part of the bargain, he consents to the transaction.

Celie is married to Mr. ____. The shock of marriage hits her hard. The children are nasty to her, hate her for being their stepmother now, accuse her of murdering their mother. The oldest boy hits her with a rock, splits her head open and she bleeds severely. The children's needs have been neglected, Celie tries to do her best by them, but she is seriously overwhelmed by her duties. Once she is done for the day, he rapes her for the first time. Thus Celie's victimhood becomes cyclical, as another abuser brands her as an easy prey and victimizes her further.[27] While it is happening, she thinks of Nettie and her safety, she wonders about Shug Avery and whether she liked when he did this to her. Once Celie is in the town, she meets her daughter Olivia and her kind adoptive mother. After following them around and asking questions, she is assured of her safety and happiness, and is put at ease so much so that she laughs for the first

[24] Roshnavand, "Rape as Catalyst to Epistolary Discourse and Womanist Bonding: Alice Walker's Reconstructive Strategy in *The Color Purple*," 21.
[25] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 117.
[26] K. Cheung, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*," 165.
[27] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 15.

time in seemingly forever. Nevertheless, this entire experience represents a stark contrast to her life with Mr. ____.

Nettie runs away from Pa and plans to find help for the other children. Mr. ____ still likes her, but she does not return the sentiment. She can see the children running over Celie and tells her to fight. "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive." (18) In this statement, she expresses her powerlessness, but also her instinctive survival mechanism kicking in. This inability to fight is a common occurrence among child abuse victims, further exasperated by the power imbalance between the abuser and the abused, an abused child often grows up to be an adult incapable of resistance.[28] After Mr. ____ sees he will not get what he wants from Nettie, he orders her to leave. Nettie is glad to do so, she only regrets to leave Celie with the children and him: "It's like seeing you buried, she say. It's worse than that, I think. If I was buried, I wouldn't have to work." (19) Celie thinks death is better than her life. First instance of suicide ideation, though mild. Both suicidal ideation and attempted suicides are much more common with abused individuals than with the non-abused ones.[29] Celie tells Nettie to find Reverend Mr. ____, and to write to her, but she never does.

Celie meets Mr. ____'s sisters. They compare her to his first wife and regard her as a much better housekeeper. Apparently, Mr. ____ treated her in much the same way he treats Celie now. He cheated on her and she did not want to be there, or at least not willingly. As N'Guessan writes: "Pa and Mr. ____'s discourse underscores violence as a tool of domination in the hands of black males."[30] His violent treatment of Celie serves as a tool of subjugation and control. Kate, a twenty-five-year-old healthy-looking old maid as described by Celie, comes to visit and tells her brother to buy Celie some new clothes. "He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need something? his eyes say." (21) His dehumanizing stare at his wife, who he considers to be his property, perfectly showcases his general mistreatment of her.

They go to the store and this experience means a lot for Celie. This is the first time, she puts on a brand new dress. Kate stood up for her, told her she deserves more which sparks the first hint of self-worth in Celie. Once they come back, Kate tells Harpo to help Celie around the house. He makes a crude remark, displaying the abusive family cycle of sexism: "Women work. I'm a man." (22) This incentivizes Kate to talk back which is a mistake because Harpo

[28] Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981, 27.
[29] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 142.
[30] Kouadio Germain N'Guessan, "'You Better Not Never Tell Nobody but God. It'd Kill Your Mammy': The Violence of Language in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," *Human & Social Studies* 4, no. 1 (2015): 78.

immediately informs Mr. ____ about her transgression. Mr. ____ calls her over and tells her something that leaves her shaking and crying. She implores Celie to fight them, but Celie thinks of Nettie who fought, ran away and now, presumably, is dead. "I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive." (22) Whether it be fight or flight, defense or escape, both cease to be either a possibility or a priority, and are put aside in the place of survival.[31]

According to Celie, Mr. ____'s behavior is reminiscent of Pa's. He beats her while the children "peek through the cracks" (23), to stop herself from crying, she dissociates and imagines she is wood. Dissociation, often used by survivors, becomes a tool for Celie through her lived abuse, both past and future, both by Pa and her husband.[32] Shug Avery comes to town and Celie has fully developed a crush on her at this point. She wants to know everything about her, can only think about her, wants to do nothing but look at her.

Around this time, Harpo has trouble with Sophia, his wife. She does not think he is her superior and therefore does not listen to his commands. Regretfully, Celie only repeats the philosophy of her husband: "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating." (35) She tells Harpo to do just that. Celie is struck down with guilt, she cannot sleep and so she goes to talk to Sophia. She is upset with her, knows what Celie has done, but does not understand why.

> I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you.
> I say it cause you do what I can't.
> What that? she say.
> Fight. I say. (39)

Sophia pities her and they talk about how hard it is to be a woman. Celie confides in her, opens up about her feelings. She tells her she used to feel mad, but she was mad at people she was not supposed to be according to the bible – her mother, father, husband. She felt sick whenever she felt anger, and so she repressed it. The more abuse she has experienced the stronger her freeze and fawn involuntary reactions became.[33] She started to lose her sense of self-worth, autonomy, even the right to feel the way she did. With every abuser, she was less and less authentically herself.

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[31] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 107.
[32] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 139.
[33] Pete Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, An Azure Coyote Book, 2013, EBSCOhost, 29.

With Shug's sickness, Celie is moved by her feelings into opposing the general status quo's reprehension of her lifestyle. This is the first instance when Celie has the urge to fight surge within her. Even though it is a quiet rebellion, it is a beginning of the future upheaval of her personhood. When Mr. ____ brings Shug to their house and announces she will stay with them, Celie fully embraces this decision. She wants to help her, stand up for her. She is mesmerized by her, describes her in great colorful detail. She is restless, losing her mind, frozen until she looks her in the eye. Celie is curious about Shug's condition, and she tells Mr. ____ she wants her to stay, a little too enthusiastically perhaps, so much so it makes Mr. ____ suspect she is up to something. Celie is realizing her attraction to Shug, it is stronger than her: "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man. […] I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short." (47) She is experiencing her first signs of arousal. It is as if her authentic self is forcefully finding its way out of the repressed prison of her psyche. This is another one of many, previously less powerful, instances that coagulated into a significant initiative boost which she desperately needed in order to look inside, feel through her emotions and not merely around them, and begin the healing process.

Shug's health improves and their relationship becomes more genuine as they become closer, friendlier. Celie takes care of her, she combs her hair, which she adores, and Shug seems to like her back. She makes up a tune, sexual in nature and inspired by Celie. With this intimate development of their relationship, Celie's feelings for Shug deepen and strengthen along with her own sense of agency and fighting spirit:

> Old Mr. ____ say to Mr. ____, Just what is it bout this Shug Avery anyway, he say. She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats.
>
> Mr. ____ don't say nothing. I drop little spit in Old Mr. ____ water. (52)

She wants to fight for Shug when someone wrongs her. She is no longer a passive victim. Even if only on the inside, her involuntary responses begin to change from freeze/fawn to fight, that is to say, her sense of self and ability to relate to others have shifted so that she is now capable of displaying and utilizing positive characteristics of her survival stress responses.[34] Her strong feelings for Shug provide an incentive for inner change. Her attraction for Shug opens a door for Celie that she did not even know existed: "Only time I feel something stirring down there

[34] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 82-83.

is when I think bout Shug." (63) She experiences sexual arousal for the first time in her life. No matter the previous attempts at liberation, only a deep-rooted, instinctive reaction her sexual love for Shug provided, could bring Celie out of the darkness of subjugation and into the light of survival.

Shug performs in Harpo's Jukejoint, she stands up for Celie when Mr. ____ does not want to let her go. Although, she is heartbroken because Shug only has eyes for Mr. ____, Celie realizes she is in love with her: "But that the way it spose to be. I know that. But if that so, why my heart hurt me so?" (70) Nevertheless, this moment is essential in Celie's recovery of her self-esteem, as Shug does what no one else has done before. She dedicates a song to her, she gives it to her selflessly, which is the opposite of what everyone else has done up till that point, take selfishly. Due to Shug's swift recovery, she has plans to leave, which obviously hurts Celie. She confesses that Mr. ____ beats her for "not being Shug." This is the first moment she discloses abuse of any kind towards her, she explicitly reaches out for help. Shug is the first person, except for Nettie, she trusts so much to do so. She is shocked, protective. She gives her comfort and reassurance that she will not leave until she knows Mr. ____'s abuse is a thing of the past. Shug resumes her sexual relations with Mr. ____, she asks Celie if she minds, but Celie could not care less who he sleeps with. She is surprised to discover that Shug enjoys this activity. Of course, for Shug, this is an instance of consensual sex, for Celie, it is marital rape, plain and simple. Celie's lack of enjoyment, more accurately her active detestation of sexual contact with both Mr. ____ and her Pa can be explained by three distinct reasons. Firstly, these acts have never been consensual, both child rape and marital rape are easily understandable as joyless, wretched acts. Secondly, they are both men, and Celie is utterly unattracted to them which might inhibit her chance of enjoyment. And thirdly, Celie has never had any sexual education whatsoever, she does not even know that she has a clitoris, which could also contribute to her lack of experiencing sexual pleasure. As she describes what he does to her, comparing it to the humiliating feeling of "going to the toilet on her," Shug tells her that she is still a virgin because she has never felt sexual enjoyment, let alone an orgasm. She educates Celie on her anatomy and suggests she go take a look at her vagina and find her clitoris.

> It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? she say from the door.
> It mine, I say. Where the button?
> Right up near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little.
> I look at her touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right button to mash. Maybe. (75)

Her lack of exploration of her own body, namely her vagina and vulva, is a direct result of her neglect and abuse. Celie has been deprived of any education whatsoever, no adult has ever familiarized her with her own body in a healthy and appropriate manner. Adults have only used and exploited her body, leaving her severely traumatized, and unable to understand or explore her body of her own accord. Thus, this is a pivotal movement in her journey. This is the first instance in her life when someone lovingly shows her the wonder and beauty of her body. How it can feel good and not bad, pleasurable, not painful. After all the degradation she has experienced from men who thought of her only as their property, something they have a right to use and abuse as they please, this beautiful woman she is in love with, magnanimously makes her feel like her body is hers and hers only and it is marvelous and free. That night, Shug and Mr. ____ have sex and Celie is forced to admit to herself that although she may not mind who Mr. ____ sleeps with, she does mind who Shug sleeps with. She touches herself for the first time and weeps as she overhears them. "My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr. ____ maybe, but start up again with Shug." (77) Celie realizes that Shug has brought crucial change into her life. She knows she is at a crucial point in her development. Shug is not like other women in her life – subjugated, imprisoned, without a free will. Shug acts more like a man, on her own and towards other women. She freely comments on their appearance and Celie, internally for the time being, adepts this behavior for herself: "Shug, I say to her in my mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do." (77)

Once Shug comes back with a husband, Celie is heartbroken, but glad she can talk to her again. They talk about Mr. ____ and Shug tells Celie that she does not feel anything for him anymore since she found out about how he abused her. Celie tells her that he only slaps her occasionally now and that they try to make sex pleasurable for both of them. This could be considered the first time Celie is not being actively raped. She may not enjoy it because she is not attracted to Mr. ____ and because she is a lesbian, but at least she has some sense of agency starting to manifest. At this point of the story, a key event for Celie's healing occurs. Celie confesses Pa sexually abused her when she was a child.

> The girls had a little separate room, I say, off to itself, connected to the house by a little plank walk. Nobody ever come in there but Mama. But one time when mama not at home he come. Told me he want me to trim his hair. He bring the scissors and comb and brush and a stool. While I trim his hair he look at me funny. He a little

> nervous too, but I don't know why, till he grab hold of me and cram me up tween his legs. […]
>
> It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen. I never even thought bout men having nothing down there so big. It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow. […]
>
> After he through, I say, he make me finish trimming his hair. (102)

She gives her a very detailed description of the first time he raped her and the cover-up routine he had prepared if anyone came asking questions. This gives the information that this was premeditated, this was not an action of a man affected by his uncontrollable sexual libido. This was a deliberate violation, a purposeful theft of power, a calculated usurpation of autonomy and self. Actions of an individual who was fully aware of the reprehensibility of his crime, took precautions to excuse his presence and to discredit his victim. Her mother even questioned him about the presence of his hair in the room, he told her Celie was sneaking in some boy. "It got to the place where everytime I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and the stool, I start to cry." (103) The image of him carrying regular household objects, triggered her trauma informed response.[35] Once, Celie opens up emotionally, on a scale for her yet unmounted, everything comes flushing back to her. She breaks down, she cries and cries. How much it hurt her, how taken aback she was, how he never looked at her the same after that. She goes over the behavior of everyone in her life and concludes that no one has ever loved her. Shug tells her she loves her and kisses her on the lips. Celie is inexperienced and sheepish, but Shug is there to help her through it. They make love.

Celie wakes up with Shug, she is happy: "What it like? […] It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. ____ at all." (104) Shug asks Celie about Nettie as she is the only person Celie has ever loved beside her. She tells her about Mr. ____'s strange behavior whenever they go to get the mail and they find the first letter. Celie is in a state of shock, she hates Mr. ____ with everything she has, and she wants to kill him. She wakes up from the powerless victim and becomes a fighting survivor, it is as if she finally found the strength within her to fight for herself. However, she is also numb, empty, feels nothing and like she is nothing, like nothing matters. They find all of Nettie's letters and Celie's metamorphosis truly begins. Now, she not only has Kate and Sophia, who were both very minor influences, or even Shug, who was a major one, she has her sister, the only person she has ever loved and who loved her back, communicating with her, exposing her to the world, different perspectives. Celie finds

[35] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 111-112.

out Mr. ____ attempted to rape Nettie. Although, she fought him off, he swore she would never hear from Celie again. Nettie writes she has been with Celie's children, giving Celie yet another reason to live and heal. Nettie also expresses gratitude for Celie's sacrifice and protection from Pa, acknowledging him raping her. Celie's desire to end Mr. ____'s life is strengthened after reading through the first few letters. She does not feel like herself, she feels numb. They sleep in the same bed with Shug, but she is too angry, too overwhelmed to feel anything sexual at the moment. She loves her, but she feels broken. "I loves to hug up, period, she say. Snuggle. Don't need nothing else right now." (131) Shug does not require sexual gratification which makes her the first person Celie has trusted, felt safe with and been intimate with who does not betray her or selfishly use her. Shug is there for her wholeheartedly. Celie's trauma gets to be too much for her. She needs comfort, care and safety which Shug provides. As a way of coping with her anger and trauma, Shug sparks the idea of making pants within her.

Through another series of Nettie's letters, Celie discovers that Pa is not actually their father. She learns about her mother's history, that white men lynched her father and his body was brought to his widow burnt and mutilated. This story explains Mama's fragile and unstable mental state, and possibly reason behind her emotional abuse of Celie. Celie is shocked and confused, her next letter is written through a regressive state of mind. It is short, abrupt, expresses very little of her inner equilibrium. This newly begun correspondence with Nettie has a multitude of effects on Celie. As Elizabeth Fifer writes, "First, Celie can begin to respond to, and be changed by, Nettie's history and experience. Second, she is released from the guilt of incest when she learns "Pa is not pa!" Third, Celie is better able to implement her own variety of Walker's narrative strategy when she moves from passively addressing a benign but distant God to addressing a human being directly."[36] Next letter is the first one addressed to Nettie, they go to see "Pa" and ask him questions. Celie is experiencing psychosomatic reactions to being back, seeing him, namely nausea. He married again, a fifteen-year-old child, clearly showing his predatory behavior has a pattern, even designated age group. It is a horrible experience for Celie, but she has Shug supporting her through it. From discovering Nettie's letters to visiting Alphonso, the events of recent days have shaken Celie to the ground. Her entire self-image has collapsed, preconceived notions are gone, the reality she has grasped up to this point is out of reach. Feelings she has repressed, denied, dissociated from, come flooding back. It is a harrowing experience, potentially traumatic on its own. Nevertheless, a necessary

[36] Rainwater, *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, 159.

part of recovery and (re)discovering an abused individual's self.[37] As Roshnavand writes, "Celie now finds a being who caringly listens and fully endorses her attempt at self-discovery and self-redefinition."[38] As a result of these experiences, Celie even redefines God for herself.

> I don't write to God no more […]
> What happen to God? ast Shug.
> Who that? I say. (173)

Celie is angry and disappointed in God. He has not done anything for her. She and Shug have a long discussion about the subject and Shug explains how she sees God. She has a pantheistic view of God. She does not believe in an omniscient individual being/man in the sky. She thinks God is in everything and everyone beautiful, in every activity people love to do, such as making love.

Celie gathers her strength back, this period of grieving and finding herself has led her to the place where she can finally stand up to her abuser. Shug aids her by bringing the subject up, thus Celie is assured she has an ally in the situation. Mr. ____ cannot believe that she dares to even suggest she leave him, filled with delusions about his wife's happiness, he cannot comprehend the notion.

> You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. (180)

Understandingly, Mr. ____ is shocked by this unapologetic act of self-respect. This is a one-eighty difference to the obedient, abused, silent wife, Celie has embodied up till this point. Celie herself ascribes the main catalyst for this dramatic change, Mr. ____'s theft of Nettie. With the upcoming promise of Nettie's return and Shug's continuous support, Celie is not alone and thus this uprising does not feel like a solitary act, but like an accompanied happening. This change within Celie does not go unnoticed by the rest of the people present at the table. Everyone is befuddled by her radical change. As she takes pride in her children's upbringing, she criticizes Mr. ____ and his offspring's outcome, this bothers Harpo and so he speaks up, but Celie does not let him. She is clearly done with the mechanics of this family, their generational trauma and the practices which originated within this system and harmed her severely. "You was all rotten children, I say. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain't dead horse's shit." (181) Once she utters these words, Mr. ____ instinctively wants to put her down, but once he

[37] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 216-217.
[38] Roshnavand, "Rape as Catalyst to Epistolary Discourse and Womanist Bonding: Alice Walker's Reconstructive Strategy in *The Color Purple*," 33.

tries to slap her, she stabs him in the hand – making a physical statement that she will no longer tolerate any abuse of her. Shug's husband commands on Celie's reputation ridding her of men's interest in her, this causes a moment of catharsis among the women in the room and they have a genuine laugh. Mr. ____'s desperation is palpable at this point of the confrontation, he threatens her with withholding money from her: "Did I ever ast you for money? I say. I never ast you for nothing. Not even for your sorry hand in marriage." (182) Through Celie's confrontation of Mr. ____, Celie finds her voice and explicitly expresses her self-worth that he attempted to completely erase. Celie says enough is enough, she is not afraid anymore. Celie firmly stands her ground even though Mr. ____ humiliates her and tries to scare her into submission, she does not waver. He calls her ugly and skinny, tries to intimidate her by explaining she is incompetent and stupid. In response, Celie curses him for every wrong he has done to her or ever will think of doing. Fueled with adrenaline, Celie loses sense of herself, Shug is there to pull her back in the moment. "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here." (187) With this declaration, Celie proudly plants herself in this world along with the seeds that will sprout into her future, she is ready for the next chapter.

In Memphis, Celie lives with Shug, they talk about architecture, their dream house. Even though Shug is constantly on the road and Celie is lonely, she is happy. She offers to go with her and take care of her needs, but Shug tells her: "You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet." (191) Celie still has the need to serve and put other's needs in front of hers. This is a sign of involuntary learned behavioral pattern that she now has the space to unlearn. Shug does not require Celie's service or for her to give something up or sacrifice, she only wants to love her and support her. "The only thing she wants from her is to become self-dependent so as to turn the page on her former condition."[39] This is the perfect catalyst for relearning and regaining self-worth and self-esteem. Celie's hobby of making pants slowly but surely turns into a business. First, she cannot comprehend that this is a job opportunity for her and she still sees it as just something she likes to do which might be difficult and might clash as a concept in her mind – something she must do, make a living, is something she loves to do, making pants. "You making your living, Celie, she say. Girl, you on your way." (193) With these words of encouragement, Celie gains financial independence, something that is almost unimaginable for a poor black woman in this

[39] N'Guessan, "'You Better Not Never Tell Nobody but God. It'd Kill Your Mammy': The Violence of Language in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," 84.

era, in these circumstances. Celie's business is growing and so she needs to hire people to help her. A colleague is of the opinion that her way of speaking is not proper. This baffles Celie because the way she wants her to speak does not attune with the way she naturally speaks. Celie's speech is an endearing trait of hers, but it is indicative of her lived trauma. Lack of education along with active suppression of expression and cognitive difficulties caused by abuse such as inability to concentrate will inevitably warp any individual's language and Celie is no exception.[40]

Celie is fulfilled, content, she feels safe and secure. Everything seems to be going well, Nettie and her children will be home soon. Celie's personality changes drastically, she is open, honest, unafraid, and therefore authentic to herself. This is visible to others, particularly in her interaction with Sophia and Harpo. They talk and smoke marijuana, Celie has adapted a new relaxed way of perceiving the world and everything in it.

> I smoke when I want to talk to God. I smoke when I want to make love. Lately I feel like me and God make love just fine anyhow. […]
>
> Miss Celie! say Sofia. Shock.
>
> Girl I'm bless, I say to Sofia. God know what I mean. (199)

She is fully herself, unapologetically. Yet another instance of a change noticed by others is when she meets Mr. ____ at Sophia's mother's funeral: "Fine, I say. I look in his eyes and I see he feeling scared of me. Well, good, I think. Let him feel what I felt." (201) The tables have turned which does not mean that Celie is the abuser now, but she is an emancipated victim, a survivor, Albert, on the other hand, is a guilt-stricken abuser who was forced to finally wake up and take responsibility for his actions and his life because he had no other choice. Apparently, he hit rock bottom and once he assuaged some of his guilt by sending Celie the rest of Nettie's letters he could live again.

Alphonso, the man Celie took to be her father, dies. Along with the news of his death, Celie learns that the house they lived in never belonged to him, but to Celie and Nettie. Celie feels the unfairness of the pleasant way he died. Feeling a sense of justice is due to be delivered, Celie thinks of all the horrible ways he could have died, but no, he died on top of his wife. Her first instinct, survivor instinct, is to reject anything connected to him and possibly to the trauma he has caused and that is inevitably attached to the house where it occurred. Shug offers an alternative outlook on things, it was her mother's wish for them to have it. This gift gives off

[40] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 293.

the sense of what she wanted to provide for them, security, and that which she regrettably was unable to provide for them when she was still alive, safety. Apart from Celie's newly acquired property rights, the event of Alphonso's death presented a new perspective of how the community saw him. Alphonso was a textbook example of a man who has fooled everyone into believing he was a good and decent man. The community loved him, he had built up this image of himself as a loveable guy so in the case of the truth coming out, people would simply be in the state of disbelieve. Abusers often have two faces, one they show to their victims, one might say authentic and pathetic, and one they show to the community, inauthentic and admirable. As Judith Herman writes, "[The perpetrator's] most consistent feature […] is his apparent normality."[41]

What comes next into Celie's life is a crisis, crisis of the heart and of self-image. Shug tells her she is in love with a boy of nineteen. Celie immediately thinks of the possible cause of this on her part. "Maybe if I had stayed in Memphis last summer it never would have happen." (223) Celie is heartbroken, shocked, taken aback emotionally and mentally, as she struggles to even speak, at one point regressing to only a written means of communication. As K. Cheung writes, "This poignant exchange harks back to the period when Celie was too dumbfounded to talk to anyone and when writing was her last resort."[42] Shug cries and pleads for Celie to understand, begs her for six months and then she will be only hers. Celie is mad and hurt but tells her she loves her and always will no matter what. This represents the first crisis of her newly found happiness.

However, this experience gives life to the newly found connection with Albert. Celie approaches this relationship dynamic with reluctance to say the least. Albert seemingly wants her back, she shuts this idea down saying that even though they are still legally married, they never truly were "a man and wife," reasoning that she is a lesbian and in love with Shug. She misses Shug and cries. Allowing herself to be vulnerable as she is no longer scared of him, this also aids Albert to be open and honest with her. Midst confusion and uncertainty, Celie receives another blow, she receives a letter informing her on Nettie and her children's death, Celie does not believe this. She is going through a crisis:

> Sometimes I think Shug never love me. I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ast myself. My hair is short and kinky […] My skin dark. My nose just a nose.

[41] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 94.
[42] Cheung, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*," 165.

> My lips just lips. My body just any woman's body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love. […] Celie, I say, happiness was just a trick in your case. (235)

A crisis of self-worth and a crisis of confidence. She is going through a period of regression that offers her the chance to reevaluate and go deeper into who she is, who she wants to be and how she wants to live her life. During this time, a budding relationship begins to blossom between her and Albert. She talks to him, they sew together, she has forgiven him. She does not hate him because of his and Shug's love for one another, and because he has truly changed his behavior. Martha Cutter writes, "Through her depiction of Albert's metamorphosis and inclusion in the conversation of sewing. Walker also elucidates broader possibilities for social amelioration."[43] Celie has found her inner peace and it is at this point she finds Shug is coming home: "I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn." (257)

The ending seems to carry happiness with it for absolutely everyone in the story. Harpo is good to Sophia, Albert is good to Celie. Shug comes back, surprised by the relationship between her and Albert, she is overcome by jealousy for a brief moment, but Celie assures her that there is no reason for that. Everything is calm and peaceful. Once Celie is reunited with Nettie and her children, serenity fills the air, and the story concludes as all of Celie's broken pieces are put back together and she is healed.

As previously mentioned, Celie completely transforms as a person. "From a pure rural, wrecked and unskilled woman unable to do anything, Celie progressively and surely becomes a useful and self-assertive character."[44] The quiet abused little girl she was in the beginning of the novel, turns into a full-fledged free woman. It is important to remark that Celie's story though tragic at the outset of her life, steadily shifts into the practically spotless image of a happy ending at the very end of the novel. Elizabeth Fifer writes, "Celie's […] development of a feminist consciousness is gradual. […] Walker's heroines gain a 'consciousness' just as if they were feminist heroines of the last decade."[45] Celie has been fortunate enough to encounter a person whose company and relationship expediated and facilitated her healing process. That

[43] Cutter, "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*," 175.
[44] N'Guessan, "'You Better Not Never Tell Nobody but God. It'd Kill Your Mammy': The Violence of Language in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," 85.
[45] Rainwater and Scheick, *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, 156.

is not to say that Celie somehow deserves less acclaim for her own merit and resolution. Celie transcends her status, from being victimized, through becoming a survivor, to her thriving.

THE BLUEST EYE

The Bluest Eye is a story that explores many topics. From the over-arching theme of internalized racism and the implications arising from the premise of black people living in a white world, to the incredibly personal and intimate subjects concerning psychology such as generational trauma, domestic violence, and cases of abuse, which even involve incest. Toni Morrison provides the perspective of a community through the contrasting lens of two families, the MacTeers and the Breedloves. Though both families possess many similarities, spreading from shared community, poverty, and race, to learned unhealthy and toxic behavior that is normalized such as hitting children. The MacTeers are different mainly due to their lack of intent to cause harm to others. Although their parenting is profoundly imperfect and significantly scars their children, it is also filled with love and protection, especially in contrast with the Breedloves that allows Claudia and Frieda to develop as full-fledged human beings with their own senses of worth and agency. The Breedloves are the epitome of dysfunction. Filled with self-hatred induced by internalized racism that makes them believe they are profoundly ugly, combined with their own unprocessed trauma and abuse, they are former victims turned abusers and perpetrators. As Laurie Vickroy wrote: "Traumatized children themselves, they continue the trauma by denying their own weakness in their abuse of parental power, by instilling their own fears of impotence, and by calling upon their children to fulfill their own unmet needs."[46] Though told from Claudia's perspective, the story's protagonist is Pecola Breedlove. Her last name overflowing with irony, Pecola's life is not one filled with love, but with immense hatred. Abused and rejected by everyone from her parents to all members of her community, Pecola stands utterly alone, with no one to provide support or aid, she drowns in the sheerness of her own trauma and completely disintegrates, hence the tragic ending of Pecola's story, a forever fragmented mind imprisoning its owner.

Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison was a well-known author who was one of the most acclaimed African-American women writers of all time. Among her many achievements, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and became the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. She was a writer and a lecturer. She wrote novels, children's books, poems, plays, essays and a libretto, and remained active until she passed away in 2019. The aim of Morrison's writing was to eloquently and wholesomely write about and for the African-American community and its members. It was "the urge to find a 'person,' a 'female,' a 'black' like herself

[46] Laurie Vickroy, "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 29, no. 2 (1996): 93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029748>.

in literature that sculpted Morrison into a writer."[47] Morrison encountered success even in the early days of her literary career. Her style was acknowledged for following the Afro-American Gothic fable tradition.[48] As Marilyn M. McKenzie writes, her "novels all move from the public sphere in which black people live, negotiate their lives with one another and with the larger white society, but each novel then moves inside to more intimate spaces. Each explores the ways in which black people's lives are simultaneously about race and not about race."[49]

In her work, Morrison often focused on the issue of identity, both of an individual and its respective community. Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is no exception to this, as this chapter makes clear. *Sula* (1973) examines ambiguity of human emotions and relationships in terms of good and evil. *Song of Solomon* (1977) is about a struggling young black man and his journey. *Tar Baby* (1981) deals with topics such as women being imprisoned in their femaleness, and the struggle between the natural and civilized world order. The following three novels represent Dantesque trilogy of Afro-American history. *Beloved* (1987) is an allegory of the inescapable haunting past of slavery and its consequences in the present. *Jazz* (1992) observes Harlem of the 1920s. *Paradise* (1998) is a story of reckless violence during the 1970s conflicts. *Love* (2003) tells the story of Bill Cosey and the women in his life. *A Mercy* (2008) once again deals with the issues of slavery and motherhood. *Home* (2012) deals with the aftermath of war as it follows a young veteran of the Korean War. Morrison's last novel *God Help the Child* (2015) is similar in many aspects to her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, it too examines the themes of shame, neglect, internalized racism, and lack of love. As Vickroy writes: "Morrison's work often recognizes the mistreatment of children (e.g., Sula and Beloved) and, though attributing it to adults who have also been brutalized, she nevertheless does not condone their abuse of power."[50] Susmita Roye adds:

> The disturbed girlhoods of Toni Morrison's disrupted girls most powerfully register her angry protest against a gender system that designates a woman a secondary rank and against a social system that effortlessly overlooks what befalls a poor (black) female child. Thus, in her world of fiction, Heeds are seduced into unhappiness; Jadines are brainwashed by the assumed superiority of white

[47] Susmita Roye, "Toni Morrison's Disturbed Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy,*" *Callaloo* 35, no. 1 (2012): 212, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2012.0013>.
[48] Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, 270.
[49] Maryemma Graham, and G. Evelyn Hutchinson, *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 229.
[50] Vickroy, "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras," 98.

> culture; Sulas need to fight back to survive; Pecolas are raped; Sorrows are preyed upon; Beloveds are murdered.[51]

In the foreword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison makes clear her intentions for the story of the novel. She eloquently elaborates on her preoccupation with the cycle of abuse, victims turned abusers, codependency and so much more. She explains why it was necessary to utilize Claudia as a narrative voice of Pecola's tragedy. She masterfully pinpoints the adverse childhood experiences that lead to Pecola's "psychological murder," as she calls it. In explaining the necessity for choosing a female child as the bearer of demonization of an entire race, she never forgets to emphasize that Pecola's situation is nonetheless unique and not representative. As Linda W. Wagner writes: "Morrison emphasizes the thematic focus of the book: the child is the product of her family's life, the lives of the families tangential to those people, and the lives of the community as a whole."[52]

The story of *The Bluest Eye* is the story of Pecola Breedlove, her family and friends. The book is divided into four segments: "Autumn", "Winter", "Spring" and "Summer". Along with the segments it is further subdivided into chapters whose narrators vary and are both known and unknown. Speaking specifically about the chapters providing The Breedlove's background and perspective, all of these are narrated by a third person omniscient narrator. There are many theories regarding the identity of this unknown narrator. The first one, providing simplicity, claims that it is an omniscient narrator that by its very nature does not possess an identity. The second one claims that Claudia constitutes the sole narrator of the novel. As Sarah Ropp suggests, "her first-person sections are drawn from her own memory and thus carry the extra weight of immediacy; the third-person narrations are built from her imagination and, perhaps, interviews with the members of her community."[53] Although, this theory is possible, given Claudia's mature way of narration even in the retrospective segments of her childhood memories, and it certainly is just as plausible as the third theory, it has never been confirmed or explicitly stated that the omniscient narrator indeed is Claudia.

Morrison herself said, "to make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken – to have the reader feel the narrator without identifying that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book – is what's

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[51] Roye, "Toni Morrison's Disturbed Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy,*" 212-213.
[52] Catherine Rainwater, and William J. Scheick, *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985, 195.
[53] Sarah Ropp, "Troubling Survivorism in *The Bluest Eye*," *MELUS* 44, no. 2 (2019): 145-146. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlz016>.

important. What is left out is as important as what is there."[54] The third theory, which occurred to me during many readthroughs of the novel, is a theory that holds merit, it being that this unknown omniscient narrator might be Pecola's future self, telling the story of her tragedy. It is never clearly stated or confirmed, so I will use this theory only loosely and not build my argument upon it, so to speak. Although, I believe this theory is interesting and there is plenty of evidence supporting it, I also think it is equally as possible that this omniscient narrator is not Pecola, as her psyche is severely fragmented and scattered at the end of the novel, and therefore she would not be able to narrate her own story in such a collected manner. Were we to believe that this particular narration takes place years after the recorded events, perhaps inside of Pecola's mind, this theory would be plausible, but only if we indulge in an unconfirmed speculation, in which Pecola somehow heals from her trauma, for which there is no evidence in the book. Nevertheless, as Wagner writes, "Morrison involves the reader by not supplying answers – so the reader does."[55] Therefore it stands to reason that both the second and third theory do hold some merit. That said, the third theory is only sporadically mentioned in this thesis, and therefore, it will not significantly influence or interrupt its process.

The reader is first introduced to Pecola through a melancholic reminiscence of a yet unknown narrator. This narrator speculates about the reason for no marigolds growing in the fall of 1941, and provides a possible explanation: "It was because Pecola was having her father's baby."[56] This chapter, albeit short, is extremely informative, apart from announcing the death of both her baby, as a direct metaphor for the seeds dying, and her father, Cholly Breedlove's death, it introduces a greater theme of the narration as a whole: "There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how." (6)

The first segment of the book "Autumn" starts with a retrospective look at the narrator's childhood. The narrator being Claudia, a nine-year-old African-American girl, the story she tells is of her and her sister's experiencing the world around them. Frieda's reality is not much different from her sister's as she is ten and mostly treated by the adults in the exact same manner as Claudia. "Claudia and Frieda McTeer provide both the voice and the understanding consciousness for Pecola Breedlove's story, a story that would have been vastly different if told

[54] Ana-Maurine Lara, and Drea Brown, eds, *Teaching Black: The Craft of Teaching on Black Life and Literature*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021, 19. ProQuest Ebook Central.
[55] Rainwater and Scheick, *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, 194.
[56] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007, 5. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated in the text by parentheses.

by another kind of observer."[57] Claudia recollects a time when she got sick and the treatment of adults, her parents, that followed. From Claudia's recollection, we get a first glimpse into a dysfunctional community. Claudia is hurt as her mother blames her for her illness and explicitly states that she is a burden, calling her "the biggest fool in this town". (10) Her mother goes as far as to blaming her for vomiting as if she had done this on purpose. After this, Claudia rationalizes[58] her trauma by explaining that her mother was not mad at her, but at the sickness, nonetheless using Claudia's name as a destination of her placed burden of responsibility. Another important character, Mr. Henry, is introduced: "We loved him. Even after what came later, there was no bitterness in our memory of him." (16) This warning of something occurring which spoiled the way they saw him is of course not reliably shared with the reader as this occurrence, Frieda being molested by Mr. Henry, did not happen to Claudia, the narrator.

In the continuation of the chapter, we are introduced to Pecola. She comes to Claudia and Frieda's house after an incident initiated by her father. They overhear their mother talking about what happened, and they learn that Cholly burned their house down and as a result is now in jail, and Pecola and the rest of her family are now outdoors. This scares the girls as they believe that "being outdoors" is the worst fate imaginable. Claudia then ponders about the humiliation of homelessness, and the danger and loneliness that come with it. As a result of this fear and pity, they are nice to Pecola. As Ropp writes: "The main condition enabling Claudia's survival is a strong and loving family; the main condition enabling Pecola's victimization, or social death, is a dysfunctional, violent family."[59] Claudia also remembers getting a white doll with blue eyes for Christmas and how it infuriated her to the point of hurting it because of what it represented, adults not listening to her needs and desires. What is more, she fantasizes about hurting actual little white girls like she hurt the doll because she hates that people assign them more value than to her.

Claudia's mother is angry because Pecola's parents have not come to see her and do not care about her well-being. Pecola gets her period for the first time, she is scared as she does not know what is happening. The girls are scared of their mother and clueless and rather than going to their mother for help they decide to deal with it on their own. Nevertheless, in a short while Claudia's mother notices them doing something she deems inappropriate, so she proceeds to

[57] Rainwater and Scheick, *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, 192.
[58] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 123.
[59] Ropp, "Troubling Survivorism in *The Bluest Eye*," 137.

beat them. Once she finds out about Pecola's menstruation, however, she calms down and changes her tone. That night the girls lay in bed and talk about what it means to menstruate:

> After a long while she spoke very softly. 'Is it true that I can have a baby now?'
> 'Sure,' said Frieda drowsily. 'Sure you can.'
> 'But … how?' Her voice was hollow with wonder.
> 'Oh," said Frieda, 'somebody has to love you.'
> 'Oh.' […]
> Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind. 'How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?' But Frieda was asleep. And I didn't know. (32)

This childlike conversation about adult topics that are way out of their reach signifies the magnitude of what the girls must deal with on their own, as there are no adults who would guide them and provide them with sufficient knowledge and support. Apart from the basic care they provide, these girls are emotionally and psychologically neglected and therefore their cluelessness leaves them much more vulnerable to any further victimization and abuse. Naturally, this conversation is even more tragic because, as the reader already knows, what happens to Pecola is the opposite of love.

The following couple of chapters are very important as they represent the first in-depth look at Pecola's family life. Their narrator is unknown and is never clearly stated, nevertheless, there are means to support the argument that these and other following chapters are narrated by Pecola as she is trying to make sense out of her family's cycle of abuse and generational trauma, as well as her own personal tragedy. What is also important to consider is that Morrison provided this omniscient narrator as a means or a mediator of Pecola's tragedy, and she could only use an omniscient narrator as there was no other way to show the intimate reasoning behind her tragedy. First, the reader receives a brief introduction to Pecola's father. Cholly is an alcoholic who has clearly experienced humiliation and trauma himself, this has transformed him into an abuser as his "ugliness," this could be understood as shame, guilt, or any other negative emotion associated with trauma or trauma itself, has become a behavioral trait for him, in other words, he considers himself ugly, he views himself as shameful. The others, as Morrison puts it, only wear their ugliness as a mask. A mask inherited by the people in their lives and the environment they are forced to live in. It is not inherently theirs, they merely use it if it suits them, like Pauline, or if they need it to survive, like Sammy and Pecola. Mrs. Breedlove uses it as martyrdom. Sammy, Pecola's fourteen-year-old brother, as a weapon to

hurt and scare others. Pecola, eleven years old, hides behind hers and closes into herself. Already here, Sammy's and Pecola's stress responses vary greatly, no wonder given the difference in gender and age. Sammy has a typical fight response, as he uses offense as a means of protection never allowing anyone to hurt him, instead he hurts them first, the ones he can at least.[60] On the other hand, Pecola has a typical freeze response, as she isolates herself and uses modes of dissociation to survive her ordeal.[61]

Pecola's parents fight viciously and physically. Her mother is scared, but seems to revel in the fighting. Her parents' hatred for one another seems to fuel their life, without it they would die. It is an extremely toxic, abusive and codependent[62] relationship and family.

> Cholly by his habitual drunkenness and orneriness, provided them both with the material they needed to make their lives tolerable. […] She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. […]
>
> No less did Cholly need her. She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. […] Hating her, he could leave himself intact. (42)

Sammy runs away often, "he was known, by the time he was fourteen, to have run away from home no less than twenty-seven times." (43) Knowing this informs upon his responses further, and we learn that he responds in both fight and flight according to the situation and person he is dealing with. Pecola is younger and a girl, she must endure. Both Sammy and Pecola are fully emerged in the hyperarousal of their post-trauma, as they are constantly on alert and preparing themselves for further abuse.[63] Already at this point there are physical signs of post trauma,[64] Pecola's mother actively attempts to initiate a fight with Cholly, as she did many times in the past, this makes "Pecola tighten her stomach muscles and ration her breath." (40) It is unknown whether Cholly had raped Pecola before this point, but apart from sexual abuse, she has been subjected to many other childhood adverse experiences: emotional and physical abuse and neglect, substance abuse, and incarceration of a relative.[65]

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[60] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 84-85.
[61] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 89.
[62] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 98.
[63] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 50.
[64] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 106-107.
[65] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 291.

Pecola is going through reactions to her lived trauma. "She struggled between an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other and a profound wish that she herself could die." (43) She wants to die or wishes for them to die, she wants to disappear, she is searching for a way out of the pain, for a way to cope. At this point, Pecola is experiencing active suicidal ideation.[66]

> 'Please, God,' she whispered into the palm of her hand. 'Please make me disappear.' She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. […] Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. […] The legs all at once […] Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (45)

She describes a process during which she is trying to forcefully dissociate.[67] Every time she almost succeeds, except for her eyes, all of the pictures and faces they have seen, the traumatic memories she cannot repress or dissociate from. She begins to pray for blue eyes every night because she thinks if she was beautiful maybe this hatred and ugliness would leave her life and her parents would not dare commit those atrocious crime in front of her – this becomes a fixation for her, a compulsion, a way to survive. Once again, we can see Pecola's freeze type manifesting.[68] Pecola visits the three prostitutes, they hate men and women, only have respect for Christian black women who have never sinned. They have their own sordid, traumatic pasts, but they are nice to Pecola. This in its own way is tragic, the only adult support she receives is from extremely inappropriate adults she should not have access to as a child. Pecola thinks about love, thinks about when Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove have intercourse, how he sounds as if he was in pain and choking, and she is completely silent. Pecola cannot decide which is worse, but thinks, "maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence." (57) This routine witnessing of sexual intercourse between her parents is without a doubt also incredibly problematic and sexually traumatizing on its own. This behavior from the side of the parents is a further example of their inaptitude to take care of a child and provide a sufficient safe space for the child to prosper.

The next segment of the book "Winter" begins with a chapter once again narrated by Claudia. This chapter is important because it showcases peer behavior toward Pecola and the

[66] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 26.
[67] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 139.
[68] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 89-90.

girls. Pecola gets bullied regularly by a group of boys who attack her blackness, even though they are themselves black, and also take a stab at Pecola's father's habit of sleeping naked, which could insinuate inappropriate sexual behavior or exposure that is in this context perceived as a shameful occurrence for Pecola. "Her further devaluation by the world, with little relief except from her playmates and the whores who befriend her, includes constant ridicule from other school children because of her dark skin, poverty and ugliness."[69] Frieda puts a stop to this particular bullying incident, and afterwards, Maureen, a rich and cool black girl, opens a conversation among the girls and Pecola. They go for ice cream and talk about periods, from the inaccuracy of their conversation, it is clear they are not educated on the manner and are merely children playing adults, then the conversation shifts awkwardly, and Maureen asks Pecola whether she had ever seen a naked man:

> Pecola blinked, then looked away. 'No. Where would I see a naked man?'
>
> 'I don't know. I just asked.'
>
> 'I wouldn't even look at him, even if I did see him. That's dirty. Who wants to see a naked man?' Pecola was agitated. 'Nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too.'
>
> 'I didn't say 'father'. I just said 'a naked man.'
>
> 'Well …'
>
> 'How come you said 'father'?' Maureen wanted to know. (71)

This exchange is significant because it is the first direct evidence of Pecola being exposed to her father being naked in front of her and her immediately connecting it to something "dirty," illicit, or improper. This is proof of either Cholly sexually abusing her at this time, or in the very least performing sexually harmful practices such as exposing himself to her directly or having intercourse with Pauline in her presence. Pecola admits to something shameful happening through her vehement denial of anything like that ever happening. She feels this is something shameful, and she already internalized this shame as hers to bear.[70] What happens next is also significant, as this conversation brings back Claudia's own trauma of witnessing her father naked, and although from her account of the event, she recalls no sexual contact with her father, that exposure alone traumatized her.

The next chapter in "Winter" is narrated by Geraldine, who is the perfect black woman (at least in the stereotypical sense that the book provides), light skinned, clearly trying to mimic

[69] Vickroy, "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras," 93.
[70] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 14.

the whiteness of actual white people in order to achieve a higher social status and increase her own personal worth for others and especially herself. Geraldine's son, Junior, is an awful bully. "Like Pecola, Junior is a victim because he is mistreated by his mother, but in a different way. He is not beaten or shouted at, but Junior never receives affection or love from his mother."[71] One day he lures Pecola to their house in promise of seeing their cat. Junior throws the cat at Pecola's head, which results in Pecola getting badly scratched. Pecola begins to cry and pleads for Junior to let her leave, but he only torments her further, locking her in a room and telling her she is his prisoner. The cat wants to be petted by Pecola and is very nice to her, which infuriates Junior and so he proceeds to torment the cat by swinging it around the room, eventually accidentally flinging the cat against a window and killing it. Geraldine comes in the room and Junior says it was Pecola who killed their cat. Geraldine takes one look at Pecola, and her own prejudices result in condemning the girl to a "nasty little black bitch." (92) Pecola represents the enemy for Geraldine, why white people hate black people. In Geraldine's twisted stereotypical view, it is because of people like Pecola - dirty, poor, immoral, taking the place away from good black children like her son Junior. This is a further example of Pecola experiencing severe trauma also outside her family and home, she is prone to being further victimized by her peers and adults around her, and indeed gets bullied and abused by others. This also means that there is no way for Pecola to reach out for help because there are no safe adults in her life.

"Spring" begins with Claudia's account of being physically abused during the season and how it was much worse than getting beaten during other seasons, she even recollects how triggering certain aspects of spring are for her. This time is also traumatic for Frieda in particular as Mr. Henry molests her. Although, there is a clear distinction in Frieda's parents' response to this abuse, compared to Pecola's mother response, it is still incredibly problematic. Frieda's parents are worried that she is "ruined", that she was raped and as a result is now pregnant or simply not a virgin anymore, putting the onus of the perpetrator's actions on the victim. This further shames Frieda and confuses her, as they provide no support for her emotional well-being. Frieda's father physically assaults Mr. Henry, thus physically removing him and preventing further victimization of Frieda, but she is still alone in the experiencing of the ordeal and the aftermath of her lived trauma. Nevertheless, Claudia and Frieda, in contrast to Pecola, have "parents whose fierce protectiveness is figured as a force of will, akin in its ferocity to the

[71] Ary Syamanad Tahir, "Gender violence in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," *Journal of Language and Literature Education*, no. 11 (2014): 6. Gale Literature Resource Center.

same anger through which [they] discover [their] self-worth."[72] Frieda is terrified of being "ruined" and ending up like the three prostitutes, but Claudia figures that not all of them are ruined because they drink alcohol. Claudia knows that Pecola's father is always drunk, so they go to ask Pecola if she could get them some. They find Pecola at the place of her mother's work, Pecola is clearly nervous and scared of her mother. She accidentally drops a fresh hot pie, resulting in her getting severely burnt. Upon discovering this, Mrs. Breedlove runs into the room, knocks her down with one blow, then picks her up and proceeds to slap her, all the while yelling at her. This angry display of power is a further proof that her mother is not a fellow victim of Cholly's, but an abuser herself. She is equally as responsible and complacent in her daughter's emotional and physical abuse as Cholly. Because she is an abuser in her own right, it makes it impossible for Pecola to receive help from her in the future after her father's sexual attacks. Unfortunately, mothers as abusers or co-abusers are very common in dysfunctional families, resulting in the children having no parental figure to confide in or plead for help to.[73]

The next chapter is yet again being narrated by the unknown omniscient narrator, and interspersed through the chapter are Pauline's, Mrs. Breedlove's, personal accounts of her past. Should the accounts of this chapter be believed, Pauline and Cholly's relationship used to be much different. They loved one another and were happy. That was until they moved north, the people there were mean, she felt lonely, and he grew distant. They struggled for money, she had to work now. Motherhood, and Pecola in particular, were not what she expected. Pecola's ugliness along with all the rest of their misfortunes warped Pauline's point of view and attitude towards them, that was when she began to mentally and physically abuse her children, long after the reciprocated abuse between her and Cholly had begun. "Pauline simply accepts that her familial situation is ugly and completely gives up on providing a sense of purpose or even love to her children."[74] Through her pondering of why she did not leave Cholly or change her behavior, it becomes clear that she is very self-centered, egotistical, and narcissistic. Presuming that she and her way of life is the only one that matters and is good enough, while being in active denial of her actions and her family's instability, she only focuses on herself and on how she is perceived as a black woman, especially by white people. She goes through her life adopting a total strategy of tunnel vision and successfully ignores all of her life's shortcomings. There is no denying that Pauline is doubly disadvantaged as she is not only black, but also a woman. This in itself presents challenges that Cholly, for example, is not forced to deal with.

[72] Ropp, "Troubling Survivorism in *The Bluest Eye*," 143.
[73] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*.
[74] Tahir, "Gender violence in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," 6.

Nevertheless, this fact does not excuse her abusive conduct against her children, just as Cholly's trauma does not excuse his.

The upcoming chapter is perhaps the most important as it provides background information of Cholly's life and his possible motivations for the abuse of his children, including his rape of Pecola. It is told once again by an unknown omniscient narrator. Cholly was abandoned as a four-day-old baby by his mother, his father had abandoned them long before Cholly was even born. Cholly was raised by his aunt, whose death impacted Cholly severely. During her funeral, Cholly had his first sexual experience that was incredibly traumatic for him. As Cholly and Darlene had sex, a group of white men who threatened them with guns, interrupted and humiliated them, so he was forced to continue. Emy Koopman writes: "This scene presents us with a double rape: Cholly is raping Darlene, unwillingly, but he is also presented as being raped by the white men with their flashlight (worming its way) and gun, their demeaning words and looks."[75] It is no wonder that this chapter told from Cholly's perspective exemplifies the sexism appearing in the community along with racism, as it is not only Cholly who is doubly raped, Darlene is as well, yet Cholly, just as much of his community would, disregards this reality. As he was unable to proceed, he only simulated his actions, all the while directing his hatred at the only person imaginable in his mind, Darlene. Perhaps because he felt he had no power over any white men, not enough to even hate them, let alone do anything against them. Cholly could not "assimilate the truth of his subjugation without being annihilated by a sense of his own powerlessness."[76] This extremely traumatic encounter began Cholly's streak of anger issues, violent behavior, and overall volatileness. Not to mention his future abuse of his wife and children. In this instance, they took away his power and from that point on he became a coward, choosing to take away the power from more vulnerable people than himself, his wife and children. Instead of empowering them and his community, and through his selfless actions gaining the power that was once taken from him back, he chose to further hurt people and spread injustice and hatred. After the death of his aunt, Cholly is fourteen at this point, he goes to see his father. His father is vulgar and nasty towards him, this meeting further traumatizes him, as he breaks down, weeps, and soils himself, while having a panic attack. After all of this, Cholly's volatileness awakens, as he feels "free" to do whatever he wants, fulfill whatever fantasy, as no one can stop him. Undoubtedly, this behavior is a direct

[75] Emy Koopman, "Incestuous Rape, Abjection, and the Colonization of Psychic Space in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night,*" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 49, no. 3 (2013): 306, <DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2012.691647>.
[76] Vickroy, "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras," 94.

result of his oppression and overcorrection to the point of committing crimes such as his self-admitted murder of three white men (159). During this time, Cholly meets Pauline, for a while he is happy, they are wild and problem-free. Until Cholly feels the responsibility of monogamous marriage and children and he feels completely incompetent and powerless yet again. As he does not know what to do or how to raise his children, he merely reacts and reverts to his old ways of "being free." Utilizing the power of alcohol, he strips himself of the chains of morality and the notion of right and wrong, and begins to gain back his power by abusing his wife and children.

What comes next is the scene of Pecola being raped for the first time by Cholly. This is particularly problematic and triggering, as the severity of his crime is magnified by the rape being told from the perspective of the rapist and not the victim, as is usually the case. Shahara' Tova Dente writes: "By stripping Pecola of her agency, Morrison compounds Pecola's blues, and she makes her a mute, flat character that must rely on other characters to narrate her experience."[77]

> Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. 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. (161)

He came home drunk and saw his daughter doing the dishes. From the very first instance, the reader can get the opposite paradoxical nature of his perception. This going back and forth between him not knowing and knowing it is his daughter, simultaneously stripping himself of guilt and admitting to his crime in the process. He clearly states that it is his eleven-year-old helpless vulnerable daughter, but yet it is as if he is attempting to persuade himself into believing that it is not that simple or clear-cut. While this scene in the kitchen is happening, he journeys through a variety of mind processes that are founded in self-hatred, self-doubt, feeling of powerlessness, and incompetence. After he comes out of these processes, he notices parallels between Pecola and Pauline. Specifically, she scratches her calf which brings Cholly in a déjà vu moment in which he used to jokingly nibble at Pauline's calf as it would make her laugh. What happens in this situation is essentially the same in the beginning, nevertheless, it extremely quickly turns from a tender joking platonic moment, into a twisted sense of arousal

[77] Shahara' Tova Dente, "'Writing Beyond Endings': Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Sapphire's *Push*," *POMPA: Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association* 34 (2017): 75, EBSCOhost.

awakened within him as he is fully aware that this is his daughter. She is in a state of shock, she is rigid and frightened, and that very notion of helplessness, powerlessness, and hopelessness is what arouses the violent sexual response in him, and he proceeds to rape her. What follows is yet another chain of contradictory reactions on his part as he claims he wants to "fuck her - tenderly" (162-163). Then he shifts the blame, shame, and guilt from himself and onto her, because it is her vagina that is "too tight", so she does not allow him to be tender, therefore he reasons he must be even more violent than up to this point. He thrusts himself into her and in that moment, she gasps for air and loses consciousness. When that happens, he is supposedly brought out of his sexual desire and is flooded with guilt and pity. Once he removes himself from her, he is once more conflicted in his own emotions and actions. He feels hatred and tenderness, so he leaves her lying on the floor, but he covers her up. It is an interesting choice, on Morrison's part, to tell this part of the story from the rapist's point of view. I will elaborate further on this in the comparative chapter. Nevertheless, this choice would make sense if it indeed is Pecola's future self's narration, trying to make sense out of the many tragedies that occurred to her, as she can do nothing else. Even so, it cannot be overstated that this form of delivery of this event is potentially very problematic and for this reason I have chosen mostly to use my own words or paraphrases to describe the scene. [78]

As a result of Cholly's rape, Pecola gets pregnant, as is evident by the image of her protruding stomach. Pecola meets yet another dangerous adult, Soaphead church, who is a self-proclaimed pedophile who has sexually abused countless girls. This man is clearly delusional, unable to live with himself, he cowers under the disguise of constant justification of his actions, portraying them as love, clean, and beautiful. This person is also the town's charlatan and that is why Pecola comes to him, to grant her the miracle of blue eyes. Pecola's mental state is extremely fragile at this point, and so all it takes for him is to tell her he granted the desired miracle, and she becomes convinced her eyes are indeed blue. Vickroy writes, "Pecola's desire for blue eyes becomes obsessive after her rape, and her conviction that she has been given them by Soaphead Church […] indicates a complete psychic disintegration."[79]

[78] I decided against using an actual word for word quotation of the rape scene as I believe it is full of attempts to excuse and downplay the severity of the crime on behalf of the perpetrator, and in my opinion, it would be disrespectful and triggering to the victim, Pecola, and other survivors potentially reading this thesis. Even if this is Pecola narrating her rape through Cholly's eyes, so to speak, in which case this purposeful attempt of humanization of her father and softening of the severity of his actions makes complete sense, I still believe my decision is the right course of action as it does not rob the novel of its integrity and value. I also believe my analysis and interpretation are sufficient in understanding the event itself.

[79] Vickroy, "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras," 100.

In the last segment of the book, "Summer", Pecola is pregnant and suffering the consequences of her father's crimes.

> 'What you reckon make him do a thing like that?'
> 'Beats me. Just nasty.'
> 'Well, they ought to take her out of school.'
> 'Ought to. She carry some of the blame.'
> 'Oh, come on. She ain't but twelve or so.'
> 'Yeah. But you never know. How come she didn't fight him?'
> 'Maybe she did.'
> 'Yeah? You never know.'
> 'Well, it probably won't live. They say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself.'
> 'She be lucky if it don't live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.' (189)

In this excerpt, it is apparent that people, including Pecola's mother, are putting the onus and blame on Pecola herself, and not solely on the rapist, her father. Victim blaming is a very common practice among the families and acquaintances of survivors.[80] On this example, we see the disgust and repulsion of the witnesses that even though is natural to certain extent (as the act of rape itself is vile and sickening) is wrongly misplaced and places further shame on Pecola. Their hatred of the Breedloves goes as far as to wishing the baby dead, calling its death lucky for Pecola. Her mother even physically attacks her, once she finds out what happened. Instead of providing support and care, she abuses her more. At this point, there is no nuance or justification for Pauline's actions, and she becomes completely complacent even in the sexual abuse of her own daughter. Claudia and Frieda plant their seeds and pray for a miracle, for the baby to survive. Thinking that once the seeds grow, Pecola's baby will be safe. The reader already knows of the tragedy that follows.

The last chapter of the book is perhaps the most important one, as it is the only chapter told from Pecola's perspective. It is a dialog between Pecola and another girl. This girl is by all accounts not real, it is a voice, an imaginary friend, or perhaps a persona of Pecola's fragmented self. Pecola is now truly enveloped in the delusion that she truly has blue eyes. This could be understood as an extreme coping mechanism taking over. She is even convinced it is because of her beautiful blue eyes that people do not look at her or speak to her, including her mother, and why she was expelled from school, because they are jealous. At the same time, she is clearly aware of what has happened. Through her speculation about the reason for her mother's strange

[80] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 106.

behavior, the persona concludes she misses him, which Pecola sees as improbable, given she had witnessed his behavior towards her, including what she deemed marital rape.

> Because he made her.
> *How could somebody make you do something like that?* […]
> They just make you, that's all. […]
> *He made you, didn't he?*
> Shut up! […] He just tried, see? He didn't do anything. You hear me? […] Who told you about that, anyway? […]
> *You did. You said he tried to do it to you when you were sleeping on the couch.*
> See there! You don't even know what you're talking about. It was when I was washing dishes. […]
> *Well, I'm glad you didn't let him.* […] *Still ...* […] *I wonder what it would be like.*
> Horrible. […]
> *Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove?*
> I did tell her!
> *I don't mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch.* […]
> She didn't even believe me when I told her.
> *So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time?*
> She wouldn't have believed me then either. (198-200) (original italics)

She goes back and forth in her mind. She simultaneously admits and denies her father raping her. Claiming he only attempted to do so, in order to abate the trauma and make her experience survivable in her mind. This belittlement of one's trauma is incredibly common among survivors, and Pecola uses it frequently along with denial and rationalization.[81] Just as the people in her community, she herself is full of guilt and shame, and she blames herself for "letting" him rape her. Pecola "seeks understanding of what her father has done to her, but her conflicted dialogue with a split-off persona of herself also illustrates how much she has been isolated and how her pain and need to speak are ignored by her community and even her family."[82] In a way, it is easier to see herself as not entirely powerless, even if it is untrue, and thus believing she could have done something, that she stopped him, that he did not actually rape her. She believes, or in the very least desperately tries to make herself believe, she has kept her power and autonomy. Nonetheless, she is furious with herself for the need to share her trauma because it makes it real, so she silences the persona. Yet at the same time, she wants to

[81] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 73-74.
[82] Vickroy, "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras," 103.

share details about what happened to her and the aftermath of it. She even provides information about the second time he raped her, and her mother's reaction of her initial confession. Pauline did not believe her the first time her father raped Pecola, so she did not see the point in telling her the second time. Then this persona wants to leave, but Pecola begs her to stay. Although, she promises she will come back, there is an immense sense of loneliness and fear present in Pecola's voice.

The end of the chapter is told from Claudia's perspective, years later. Pecola's baby died, and she fully succumbed to madness, displaying symptoms of BPD[83] and/or schizophrenia[84], which are both common misdiagnosis of CPTSD.[85] Claudia and Frieda never approached her again because of the guilt they have felt for "failing" her, blaming themselves for not burying the seeds deep enough. Claudia and Frieda's behavior is yet another example of misplaced guilt and shame. They were only children, completely helpless and powerless, victims of the adults around them. Claudia reminisces about the past, about how people, including her and Frieda, used Pecola as a tool or means through which they could all assuage themselves of all the negativity and ugliness, and in the process place it on her. Wagner writes:

> Morrison deftly creates an intimacy between the narrator and the reader that she then disrupts with the plural pronouns, 'we' and 'our.' Of course, Claudia understands, at the end of the narrative, how she and her community are implicated in what happened to Pecola, but the repetitious, insistent use of the plural pronoun in the final paragraphs of the novel suggest that the reader may too be implicated.[86]

As Roye puts it:

> Although the doomed protagonist of the novel degenerates into socially unacceptable […] incoherence, the novel forcefully achieves the goal it has set for itself in the beginning, namely, finding out the 'how' of events, whereby the more difficult 'why' is also gradually answered and thus the novel finally surfaces, making greater sense than it promises at the start.[87]

Claudia is given the responsibility of the "how," the omniscient narrator of the "why." Pecola's silence throughout the novel is significant. It adds weight to the austerity of her plight. Although

[83] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 101.
[84] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 93.
[85] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 141,148.
[86] Graham and Hutchinson, *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 2004, 223.
[87] Roye, "Toni Morrison's Disturbed Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy,*" 223.

potentially problematic and triggering at certain points of her story, Morrison's intentions are made crystal clear by the emotional impact the novel and Pecola's story have on the reader.

Pecola's story is tragic. From beginning to end, there is no hope for her. She is all alone, raised by parents who only neglect and abuse her, in her search for help, she encounters more inappropriate adults who only further victimize her. Rejected and shamed by her community, she is forced to succumb deeper into the mad state of her fragmented mind. Vickroy writes:

> [In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison] shows a strong awareness that victims of trauma are mentally imprisoned and isolated by their traumatic experience, and she makes it very clear that disturbed relationships reflect and interconnect with a broader social context. Focusing on traumatized characters who return to unresolved memories, she suggests that our ability to change the nature of our attachments to others depends on whether we evaluate the past and examine our behaviors and relations in it.[88]

[88] Vickroy, "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras," 106.

PUSH

Push is a story of a sixteen-year-old African-American girl who has been mentally, physically, and sexually abused by both her mother and father. Precious has been severely neglected from a very young age, when she was approximately three. As a result of these early life adverse experiences, she has developed all sorts of cognitive and psychological issues, that all generally fall under the umbrella of CPTSD, as will be demonstrated in this chapter. Through narrating her own story in the form of journaling, Precious seizes control of her life and future. As Precious gradually becomes literate, she is able to express the history of her inner turmoil in the written form. Because she was conditioned from a very young age that to speak means to be ridiculed, beaten, or even raped, and that speaking up does not indeed prevent any of these crimes perpetrated against her, Precious struggles with any form of verbal expression, confession, or sharing. At the end of the novel, Precious seems content with her life. She has confronted her aggressor, her mother. She has her son, and a supportive group of friends around her. Her HIV diagnosis, nonetheless, suggests a short and difficult road ahead. Precious's story provides both hope and despair evenly. Her story is tragic and stultifying in many aspects, yet it presents an uplifting narrative of healing and recovery, all the while remaining anchored in the often grisly realm of realism.

Ramona Lofton chose the name "at the height of the New Age movement. […] At one time in African-American culture, the name also had a very negative connotation. Sapphire was, like, the evil, razor-toting type of belligerent black woman."[89] Sapphire is a writer and a poet. She moved to New York in 1977, she first worked as an exotic dancer, all the while sharpening her skills of a poet. During this time, she also joined an organization named United Lesbians of Color for Change Inc. She earned a bachelor's degree in modern dance, and went on to receive a master's degree in writing. Even though Sapphire has publicly outed herself as bisexual, she has been quite private about her personal life. Spreading her interests into many sectors of culture and employment, such as being a teacher of reading and writing in Harlem, which bolstered her inspiration for *Push*'s Ms. Rain, her literary oeuvre has not been as extensive as that of other professional author's. As Silvia Borrego writes, through her portrayal of Miss Rain, and Farrakhan's opinions in the novel "Sapphire is clearly offering a harsh

[89] Mark Marvel, "Sapphire's Big Push," interview, 1996, https://web.archive.org/web/20080310212513/http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_n6_v26/ai_18450196.

critique of homophobia, inscribing *Push* within the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual) genre and furthering the African American tradition of Black feminism."[90]

Sapphire wrote three books of poetry: *Meditations on the Rainbow* (1987), *American Dreams* (1994), and *Black Wings & Blind Angels: Poems* (1999). Her first novel *Push* (1996) received the Book-of-the-Month Club's Stephen Crane award for First Fiction, among others, and was adapted into the Oscar winning motion picture *Precious*. Her second novel *The Kid* (2011) is a sequel to *Push*, as it follows the life of Precious's son Abdul. In her work, Sapphire focuses on the lives of marginalized members of her own community. She aims to reconnect the stories of women who have been ignored or shunned because of their unfortunate life experiences to the mainstream conversation of human life and humanity. As Sapphire says: "I meditated on the words of James Baldwin who said, 'The most dangerous creation of a state is the man who has nothing to lose,' and I thought about the black women and children who also have nothing to lose and often no reason to live."[91] *Push* highlights a vast number of issues. Offering readers and critics to analyze the novel from many different points of view, as well as providing a plentiful pasture for their particular fields of study, including literature, psychology, or sociology, and many more. "*Push* has been considered by critics such as Riche Richardson (2012) and Carme Manuel (2000) to be a neo-slave narrative."[92] This assessment was, of course, brought about by the very environment and system in which *Push* is situated. Afterall, Precious's story is a product of her impoverished segregated neighborhood whose people are at best abandoned, or at worst purposefully oppressed by the white community. Precious's story is also primarily about the injustice of abuse and complacency of her community (both black and white) which allows the abuse to continue and does not put a stop to her exploitation, even though it is entirely in their power to do so. What were slave narratives about if not abuse and injustice that was entirely preventable and stoppable if it were not for the cowardice, malice and complacency of the white community? (of course not all white people were to blame for the crimes of slavery, as without white allies the abolitionist movement would, sadly, have nowhere near as much power and momentum behind it)

The first chapter of *Push* begins with a quick overview of Precious's personal history. She got impregnated by her father when she was twelve, and as a result of that got held back in

[90] Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego, "Re(Claiming) Subjectivity and Transforming the Politics of Silence through the Search for Wholeness in *Push* by Sapphire," *Atlantis* 36, no. 2 (2014): 154, EBSCOhost.
[91] Elizabeth A. McNeil, et al, "'Going After Something Else': Sapphire on the Evolution from *Push* to *Precious* and *The Kid*," *Callaloo* 37, no. 2 (2014): 356, <www.jstor.org/stable/24265012>.
[92] Borrego, "Re(Claiming) Subjectivity and Transforming the Politics of Silence through the Search for Wholeness in *Push* by Sapphire," 150.

school for a year. She also was held back when she was seven, for a yet unknown reason. Her daughter has Down's Syndrome. She is pregnant for the second time and is being suspended, which she deems as unfair because she has done nothing wrong. She expresses an overall sense of dissatisfaction and hopelessness in her situation.

Precious tells a story of a school day when she humiliated a teacher as a defense mechanism so nobody would know she does not recognize page numbers. We also learn she often daydreams about herself and her math teacher being married. She realizes her size, height and weight, and translates it into strength and power against the other children. She thinks she keeps "law and order," but gives off no sense of unprovoked aggression. This offers her a sense of importance and worth. She is taken into Mrs. Lichenstein's office, who questions her about the pregnancy. What is present is an apparent lack of trust of Mrs. Lichenstein, Precious perceiving her as a white privileged lady who looks down on her because of her circumstances. Precious becomes angry, attempts to physically assault her, and calls her a "cunt bucket," which is what her mother calls women she dislikes. Precious exhibits signs of mimicry of her abusers, through her mindset, actions, and especially verbal expression, which is vulgar and uneducated. What is apparent is that Precious "has fallen through the cracks and has made it to the ninth grade because of 'social promotion,' not because she has learned basic skills."[93]

Precious recalls her first birth, through a flashback, the pain she has felt due to contractions, and the trauma attached to it due to the behavior of her mother.

> 'Slut! Goddam slut! You fuckin' cow! I don't believe this, right under my nose. You been high tailing it round here.' Pain hit me again, then she hit me. I'm on the floor groaning, 'Mommy please, […] Mommy!' Then she kick me side of my face! 'Whore! Whore!' she screamin'.[94]

Her mother verbally, mentally, emotionally, and physically abuses her in this instance. The neighbors are screaming at her through the door, pleading for her to stop this, and get Precious the help she needs. Her mother evidently shows signs of delusion as she previously hinted on the identity of the father of Precious's child, yet now claims she was unaware of Precious being pregnant, which is impossible as the whole building knew. This shows a clear neglect on behalf of the community, and their complicity in Precious's abuse, as no one has informed child

[93] Wendy A. Rountree, "Overcoming Violence: Blues Expression in Sapphire's *Push*," *Atenea* 24, no. 1 (2004): 137, EBSCOhost.
[94] Sapphire, *Push*, New York: Vintage, 1997, 9. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated in the text by parentheses.

protective services or attempted to aid Precious in any way. During this encounter, Mary, Precious's mother, gaslights her, blames her, and shames her. Miss West calls an ambulance and the paramedic calms Precious down and helps her, all the while urging her to push, which she does. So thoroughly, in fact, that "push" becomes her motivation in life and the name of the novel.

Precious is in the hospital, when a nurse asks her questions, Precious experiences a small dissociative episode, a flashback during which she is unable to hear the nurse. The nurse discovers she is twelve, and that her father raped her. Utterly shocked, aimlessly muttering, "Shame, thas a shame." (12) She proceeds to ask Precious: "Was you ever, I mean did you ever get to be a child?" (13) Precious presumes this question stupid, thinking she is a child. Precious is interrogated by a couple of policemen, whom she clearly does not trust. Exhibiting a possible ideological domestic programming making her believe that police is to be feared and hated, she tells them nothing.

Coming back to the present moment, Precious is back home. Her mother is screaming at her, but she is still mentally in that memory of four years ago. Precious is mortified of her, yet at the same time desperate and angry enough to defend herself if need be, holding onto a knife while she is doing the dishes. Mrs Lichenstein rings the bell with an offer of an alternative education, her mother urging her to prevent her from doing so makes Precious think: "She closer to the door than me but I mean my muver don't move 'less she hast to. […] I hate my muver sometimes. She is ugly I think sometime." (14) Through this interaction, we can see the way her mother commands her, she does not even move. She has a complete control over her daughter, or almost complete, as Precious's emotions and instincts are still intact and therefore, she is holding on to her sense of autonomy and freedom of thought.

Precious remembers two days after she had her first baby. Still at the hospital, they bring her baby and inform her that she has Down's Syndrome, and was oxygen deprived during birth. The nurse hugs her, shows her empathy and care, which makes Precious cry as no one did that for her before. Her mother beats her, humiliates her, makes her eat compulsively under the threat of further physical abuse. Her father rapes her, never shows her any love. She experiences zoning in and out of the present moment through a sequence of non-chronological flashbacks. She recollects her first four grades in school. They are all shrouded in darkness. She was emotionally and physically neglected. She was dirty, with her father's sperm staining her clothes. She had problems learning and focusing in school. Not seeing the point in trying to

learn or focus when she knew what was happening to her, she put her head down, suppressed and survived through the years. When Precious comes back from the hospital, her mother beats her viciously, calling her a "whore," she blames her for Carl, her father, leaving.

> Mama slap me. Hard. Then she pick up cast-iron skillet, thank god it was no hot grease in it, and she hit me so hard on back I fall on floor. Then she kick me in ribs. Then she say, 'Thank you Miz Claireece Precious Jones for fucking my husband you nasty little slut!' I feel like I'm gonna die, can't breathe, from where I have baby start to hurt.
>
> 'Fat cunt bucket slut! Nigger pig bitch! He done quit me! He done left me 'cause of you. What you tell them mutherfuckers at the damn hospital? I should kill you!' she screaming at me.
>
> I'm lying on the floor shaking, crying, scared she gonna kill me. (19)

Precious is deadly scared of her. As Borrego writes, "she has learnt not to expect any protection from her mother, who sent her the message 'your father first, you second.'"[95] Mary makes her cook a lot of food, and then forces her to eat so much she is sick and passes out. Mary herself clearly has a troubled relationship with food and she effectively forces Precious to develop an eating disorder, binge-eating, which is one of many signs of abuse Precious exhibits.[96] Then once Precious gains back consciousness, her mother sexually assaults her by touching her vagina while masturbating. Precious pleads for God to help her fall asleep. Although mother-daughter incest is incredibly rare, in fact the rarest form of parental sexual abuse, it still occurs.[97] Already at this point, it is indisputable that Mary is equally as guilty of every kind of abuse of her daughter as her father, if not more so. Granted, her father rapes her, which is a terror striking abuse of his power over his daughter. However, Mary is the primary abuser in Precious's life, in my opinion. She sexually abuses her, just like Carl, but in addition to that she terrorizes her through every second of Precious's existence, through every possible form of abuse. Borrego refers to the father-daughter abuse, and stresses the differences between abuse by a stranger and abuse by a father: "The victim feels overwhelmed by her father's superior power and unable to resist him; she may feel disgust, loathing and shame, but at the same time she often feels that

[95] Borrego, "Re(Claiming) Subjectivity and Transforming the Politics of Silence through the Search for Wholeness in *Push* by Sapphire," 151.
[96] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 114.
[97] Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 18-19.

this is the only kind of love she can get, and prefers it to no love at all."[98] In *Push*, this is equally as true for the abuse Precious suffers at the hands of her mother.

Precious is on her way to the bus stop. She starts thinking about how she will get out of her mother's house. She looks around, and comes to the conclusion that all the other men are safe, but not Carl. Then she experiences a severe, very detailed and drawn-out flashback.

> This time I know Mama know. […] She bring him to me. I ain' crazy, that stinky hoe give me to him. […] Got to where he jus' come in my room any ole time, not jus' night. He climb on me. Shut up! He say. […] Git usta it, he laff, you is usta it. I fall back on bed, he fall right on top of me. Then I change stations, change bodies. (24)

Precious is convinced her mother knows about her father raping her regularly. Given the details she provides in this flashback, along with every other piece of evidence mentioned in the story so far, it is certain that her mother has full knowledge of the abuse, perhaps even has a part in it. Precious suspects that Mary has sacrificed her daughter and offered her to him. This behavior can occur in mothers that are incompetent and unprotective of their daughters.[99] This is entirely believable as Mary is very malicious and hateful toward Precious, nonetheless it is only a speculation at this moment in the story. During this flashback, Precious also informs us about the changing nature of her father's abuse, as he used to be more cautious and secretive about his crime, but now that he has tested how far he can go unpunished, he is completely confident in his untouchability. Precious describes a learnt and adopted process of dissociation, during which she disappears from the present act of being raped, and transfers her mind into a fantasy of her own making. In this fantasy, she is a dancer, appearing in videos and movies with everyone praising her for her talent. Sapphire describes these dissociative episodes thusly, "Precious is traumatized to the point where she can no longer stay in her present reality and maintain psychic viability."[100] Carl breaks her dissociative state by speaking to her, telling her he will marry her. She wants to scream at him that what he is doing is illegal, but she does not want to get beaten. Wendy Rountree writes: "She has learned from previous instances of her father's abuse that the more she verbally protests the more violent her father becomes, so she remains silent and endures the abuse. As a result, Precious learns that voicing leads to punishment."[101] Precious experiences involuntary arousal and subsequently, involuntary

[98] Borrego, "Re(Claiming) Subjectivity and Transforming the Politics of Silence through the Search for Wholeness in *Push* by Sapphire," 151.
[99] Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest,* 49.
[100] McNeil, et al, "'Going After Something Else': Sapphire on the Evolution from *Push* to *Precious* and *The Kid*," 355.
[101] Rountree, "Overcoming Violence: Blues Expression in Sapphire's *Push*," 135.

orgasm. Carl enjoys this immensely, as it is a way for him to delude himself into believing this is somehow consensual. Precious feels unbearable shame. At this moment the bus driver brings her out of the flashback by asking her a question and then she goes to school.

She takes a test, but she does not trust the lady who is administering it, as she is dark-skinned and fat, just like her mother. During this brief moment, it becomes clear that she bears the weight of internalized racism, as she values light-skinned and white people more than dark-skinned ones. This makes her think of a show about vampires that were invisible when someone took a picture of them. She sees herself as this vampire, she thinks the system sees her as that too, as someone who sucks out their money and is bad. As Heather Hillsburg writes:

> Precious's anger is transferred into longing for whiteness and the markers of class she thinks accompany light skin, allowing her to imagine herself as the antithesis of the public images of black women that are continuously forced upon her. Precious thus feels anger, not only at her suffering, but also at being denied the visibility and protections granted to the white child within the intimate public sphere.[102]

In fact, she does not even see herself or feel her body, or where it begins and ends. She ponders about her life and about how if she were white, her mother and father would not abuse her. She makes clear she is used to their treatment of her, but it hurts her, nonetheless. Precious wishes she was not alive, this is one of the first instances in the novel where she expresses suicidal ideation, a phenomenon which is very common in abuse survivors.[103]

Precious feels no sense of self-worth, calling herself stupid and ugly, she is adopting the self-degrading language her mother uses against her. She feels like she is nothing, her mother only uses her and her baby to get welfare money. Precious is aware she could be on welfare for herself, and be on her own, but she is unsure whether she is ready for that. She is experiencing severe states of confusion by all of the dissociative states and flashbacks, only worsened by the involuntary arousal she feels while she is raped by her father. She feels unanchored once everything "gets swimming," she does not comprehend or is unable to tell time. She is not properly tethered to the present moment, her body, or physical surroundings.

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[102] Heather Hillsburg, "Compassionate Readership: Anger and Suffering in Sapphire's *Push*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 44, no. 1 (2014): 142. EBSCOhost.
[103] Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 26.

In the following section, Precious talks about her relationship with education and provides a background of her developmental issues. “I always did like school, jus’ seem school never did like me.” (36) Precious did not talk during her time spent in kindergarten and first grade, her schoolmates ridiculed her for that. In the second grade, Precious began to talk, but now her peers bullied her for the way she spoke, thus she stopped speaking again. She experienced enuresis, she urinated involuntarily during states of paralysis. Enuresis or “bedwetting” is a very common sign of abuse in very young children, especially sexual abuse.[104] Once the child is experiencing a flashback or is in a state of shock or fright, they are paralyzed and are unable to control their urination. It was around this time, Precious was raped for the first time by her father, or at least that is how far back she recalls the sexual abuse occurring.

> Seven, he on me almost every night. First it’s just in my mouth. Then it’s more more. He is intercoursing me. Say I can take it. Look you don’t even bleed, virgin girls bleed. You not virgin. I’m seven. (39)

On her way to school, as she is experiencing all of these flashbacks, Precious feels intense self-hatred. She zones out again, not realizing she stopped walking. Ms. Rain beckons her to come closer, so she does. She takes a seat in the first row, which is good as she could not see anything on the blackboard from the back row where she was sat every time until now. Then, as they are getting to know one another, she wants to tell Ms. Rain about all her learning difficulties.

> ‘Well Precious, how about you, do you feel you’re in the right place?’
>
> I want to tell her what I always wanted to tell someone, that the pages, ’cept for the ones with pictures, look all the same to me; the back row I’m not in today; how I sit in a chair seven years old all day wifout moving. […] I look Miz Rain in the face, tears is coming down my eyes, but I’m not sad or embarrass.
>
> ‘Is I Miz Rain,’ I axes, ‘is I in the right place?’
>
> She hand me a tissue, say, ‘Yes, Precious, yes.’ (48)

As she begins crying, she feels empathy, understanding, trust, safe space – all for the first time. She feels welcomed in the classroom, everyone is kind and friendly to her. They start learning the alphabet, Precious is asked to read for the first time, and she has a panic attack. She confesses she does not know how to read, and then immediately calms down. Ms. Rain is very patient with her and helps her read her first sentence ever. Precious is happy. This is the first

[104] “Child Sexual Abuse,” *rainn.org,* Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), <https://www.rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse> 25 June 2022.

safe environment for her, a place where she does not have to be on alert, experiencing hyperarousal[105], nonstop. A place where she can confess things about herself and her past that she considers shameful, yet no one judges her for them. Ms. Rain and the girls become crucial allies on Precious's journey towards recovery and non-adverse life. It is through them she learns self-confidence, self-respect, and self-worth, which is crucial for her standing up to her abusers and telling her story.

Once she comes home from school, she receives further abuse from her mother. In reference to the previously mentioned panic attack, she remembers past abuse enhancing panic attacks. She describes somatic symptoms such as hyperventilation and inability to breathe. These states of panic and anxiety, although similar, are not the same in survivors of abuse as they are in individuals suffering solely from anxiety disorders. They are much more intrusive and overwhelming, not to mention interconnected with other symptoms of CPTSD.[106] She has another flashback of the rape, and the involuntary arousal. She feels awful, whenever she experiences involuntary arousal, she hates herself for feeling the way she does. Almost as if it was her fault, and she was somehow responsible for what was happening to her mind and her body during those moments. The issue of involuntary arousal and orgasm during acts of sexual abuse or rape is a very common one. Along with the internal shame and confusion of one's body betraying them, there is the additional shame of victim blaming that can occur as there have been instances of rapists using their victim's arousal or orgasm as a defense strategy and have successfully evaded their punishment. Nevertheless, there are studies that prove the common sense idea of arousal and orgasm as a physiological reaction to a stimulation to one's body is something that a person has no control over and thus it can and very often does occur during acts of sexual abuse and assault.[107] Precious has a flashback nightmare during which she as a sixteen-year-old is choking, observing her baby-self being sexually abused by her mother, specifically being forced to perform oral intercourse on her mother.

Precious writes her first sentence in school, and feels the urge to write and express herself through writing. Through the class's continual support, she is advised to have a prenatal check-up which she is utterly unaware of even existing as a possibility, let alone a routinely performed procedure. With her newly discovered sense of self, Precious begins reimagining

[105] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 50.
[106] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 143.
[107] Roy J Levin, Willy van Berlo, "Sexual Arousal and Orgasm in Subjects who Experience Forced or Non-consensual Sexual Stimulation -- a review," *Journal of Clinical Forensic Medicine* 11 no. 2 (2004): 82-88, <doi: 10.1016/j.jcfm.2003.10.008>.

herself, her past, her life, and the role of people in it. Although still heavily filled with internalized racism and skewed perception of herself as a black girl, she manifests a scenario in her head. A reimagination of her past abuse, how her mother could have saved her from him if she had been a good and proper mother. That she should have saved her, in other words, that Precious was deserving of protection and love. She admits to herself that if it were not for the welfare cheque, her mother would have probably killed her by now. As a homework assignment, Precious writes in her notebook, to the theme of "A is for," the entirety of the English alphabet revoking negativity and violence, such as "evil like mama."

Precious gives birth to a boy, Abdul. Once Precious leaves home and stays in the hospital, she gains a distance from her abusers, which allows her to reevaluate her life.

> I glad Precious Jones was born. I like baby I born. […] But he's not mine. I mean, he is mine, I push him out my pussy, but I didn't meet a boy 'n fall in love, sex up 'n have a baby.
> I think I was rape. (68)

Uncertain and helpless, Precious does not know how to proceed with her life. She is certain she wants to continue with her education, as well as take care of her son. As Lydia Kokkola writes, "Her nascent maternal skills, her protection of her son, Abdul, her pride in and her concern for his cognitive development, all suggest that she has the capacity to become an excellent mother."[108] With the help of supporting correspondence with Ms. Rain, Precious is finally able to voice that what happened to her was indeed rape and abuse. As Dente writes, "Sapphire […] allows Precious the agency to be both victim and victor as she speaks for herself."[109] Ms. Rain guides her through her letters, providing support and advice, yet never pressuring her into any decision, only gifting her with a sense of agency. Once Precious comes back from the hospital, her mother attacks her and tries to kill her, all the while screaming verbal abuse at her. Precious runs out, and once she is at a safe distance says: "Nigger rape me. I not steal shit fat bitch your husband rape me rape me." (74) This is the first instance of Precious voicing what has been done to her, out loud. In this instance, her act of grasping agency "is pivotal for Precious to achieve any degree of identity."[110] She goes to the hospital where she had her first baby. When the nurse says she hoped she would have learnt from her mistakes, Precious denounces the

[108] Lydia Kokkola, "Learning to Read Politically: Narratives of Hope and Narratives of Despair in *Push* by Sapphire," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 43, no. 3 (2013): 394, EBSCOhost.
[109] Dente, "'Writing Beyond Endings': Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Sapphire's *Push*," 78.
[110] Borrego, "Re(Claiming) Subjectivity and Transforming the Politics of Silence through the Search for Wholeness in *Push* by Sapphire," 153.

blame being placed on her, claiming her only mistake was being born, that her father made a mistake when he raped her. She rejects shame, as she now knows it does not belong to her. She says she loves herself for the first time.

They are reading *The Color Purple* in school. This book profoundly affects her, she weeps and relates to Celie's story deeply. In the beginning, Precious has an issue with Celie being a lesbian because of the homophobic rhetoric of Farrakhan, but once Ms. Rain tells her she is a lesbian, Precious challenges her own biases and changes her mind. Time after time, Ms. Rain proves herself to be a vital ally for Precious. Someone without whose support Precious would be incapable of making the progress she does. Hillsburg writes:

> Ms. Rain not only teaches Precious to read and write, she validates her experiences and helps her to unlearn the hate that she has absorbed from her parents. Rather than react in anger toward Precious's own homophobic and racist attitudes (for example, Precious does not want to leave Harlem for fear of other racial minorities), Ms. Rain shows Precious that such hatred is taught and that it is not other subjugated groups who have abused and neglected her.[111]

Precious loves the book, says it gives her strength. They debate the controversies of the book and its criticisms. Precious thinks that the portrayal of men is authentic to her experience and believes that a happy ending can happen – "I don't know what 'realism' mean but I do know what reality is and it's a mutherfucker, lemme tell you." (83)

Precious is now living in a halfway house. Mary comes to tell her that Carl died of AIDS. Precious experiences mixed emotions, confusion about how she should hate her mother and father, yet she does not. She names her mother as the complacent abuser, whom she is. She takes a look at her, sees how bad she looks and smells, and questions her own worth, how much she is alike to her. Once she learns about the diagnosis, she is scared for her and Abdul. She thinks about *The Color Purple*, remembering Celie's rapist was not actually her father, and asks Mary if Carl was her real father. Grasping at straws, she attempts to lessen the harshness of her reality. Precious learns that Mary and Carl were never married, he had a wife and children, and only ever came to their house to take money and rape Precious. Then they have a conversation about AIDS, and Mary tells her she cannot have it because she and Carl never had anal sex. Precious expresses a thought deeming her mother "a stupid bitch," and tells her to get tested. In

[111] Hillsburg, "Compassionate Readership: Anger and Suffering in Sapphire's *Push*," 133.

Precious's darkest hour, she now needs the support of her class, Ms. Rain, and her newfound idols – Alice Walker, Harriett Tubman, and Aretha Franklin – more than ever. She begins asking herself all sorts of questions. She is grieving the childhood she has been robbed of, expressing first instances of empathy toward herself and her situation. Precious learns she is HIV positive. She has an existential crisis. She is tired, drowning in darkness. Everything is too much. She feels like she cannot change her life. She is going through the shock of living with HIV. She is angry and depressed. She learns about the stories of the other girls in her class and feels like she does not even have it the worst compared to them. She tells Ms. Rain and the girls everything. They are there for her, to help to pull her out of the dark.

> I still don't move. She say, 'Write.' I tell her, 'I am tired. Fuck you!' I scream, 'You don't know nuffin' what I been through!' I scream at Ms Rain. […] 'Open your notebook Precious.' 'I'm tired,' I says. She says, 'I know you are but you can't stop now Precious, you gotta push.' And I do. (97)

After going through this crisis, Precious is trying to find her voice. Everything is changing for her. At first, she does not understand why she is feeling as bad as she does. She thinks it is solely because of the HIV diagnosis, but Ms. Rain explains to her it is about her trauma, about what her mother and father did to her. She thinks she escaped them, and so they should not influence her anymore. She is confused, unsure of who she is or what she thinks. With the help of writing, she works through her emotions. She wants love, but is scared she will never have it. She walks through the streets of Harlem and ponders about the ugliness of the world. She is conflicted. She has been conditioned to hate addicts and gay people, but then she knows Rita is an addict in recovery, Ms. Rain is a lesbian, and she loves them both, as they are kind to her.

Precious starts seeing a counselor. She talks about her past, she still experiences severe flashbacks. When she thinks about her father, she is conflicted and confused about her emotions and her body. She is experiencing somatic flashbacks through involuntary arousal, and psychosomatic post-traumatic responses, such as gastrointestinal issues – stomach upset, stomach cramps, nausea.[112] She expresses intense self-hatred towards her mind and her body whenever she thinks about her father.

> My body not mine, I hate it coming. Afterward I go bafroom. I smear shit on my face. Feel good. […] I bite my fingernails till they

[112] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 119.

> look like disease, pull strips of my skin away. Get Daddy's razor out cabinet. Cut cut cut arm wrist, not trying to die, trying to plug myself back in. I am a TV set wif no picture. I am broke wif no mind. No past or present time. (111-112)

Precious used to self-harm. She used to cut herself with a razor, extremely common practice in survivors of abuse,[113] as well as perform acts of defecation, and subsequent smearing of feces onto herself. This is not uncommon in young victims of sexual abuse, both urinal and fecal incontinence, including using one's own urine and feces in order to smear them onto oneself, others, or other objects, as a means to protect oneself or as another means of self-harming are common practices in children experiencing sexual abuse.[114] These are also warning signs of regression in developmental stages of the child. Precious also describes compulsion disorders such as onychophagia, nail biting, and dermatophagia, skin picking. Both of these disorders, as well as other compulsions, are often present in childhood abuse survivors, and are signs of post-traumatic stress relief in individuals, unhealthy behavioral patterns that are deeply integrated in the unconscious everyday repetitions of survivors.[115]

Precious ponders about what constitutes a normal life, and realizes the full scope of abnormality of her experience. When her counselor asks her what the first memory of her mother is, Precious cannot bring herself to answer this question. It is the smell of her mother's vagina. From this memory, it is obvious that Mary sexually abused her from a very young age, possibly when she was four to six years old. Precious does not trust her counselor, thus she withholds a lot of information in order to protect herself. She steals her file, learns that the counselor is not there for her, but on behalf of welfare.

Precious writes about how somebody should have helped her when she was twelve and gave birth to her father's baby. Carl and Mary should have been put in jail. She reasons the system has failed her. She goes to her first incest survivors anonymous meeting. She feels unable to share anything in the group, as she would have to explain the war in her body, and she is not ready for that. She writes about how she feels out of place and time, too young, yet too old at the same time. People share their stories, and Precious no longer feels alone or alienated, but then she wonders how horrible this world really is if what happened to her

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[113] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 132.
[114] Michael W Mellon, Stephen P Whiteside, William N Friedrich, "The Relevance of Fecal Soiling as an Indicator of Child Sexual Abuse: a preliminary analysis," *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics* 27 no. 1 (2006): 25-32. <doi: 10.1097/00004703-200602000-00004>.
[115] M. Ivanov, N. Platonova, & G. Kozlovskaya, "Long-term Mental Health Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse," *European Psychiatry* 30 no. S1 (2015): 1. <doi:10.1016/S0924-9338(15)30949-4>.

happens to so many people. She shares for the first time, a brief confession of her father and mother sexually and physically abusing her. After the meeting, they go out for coffee. Precious feels much lighter. She feels kindness and love from these strangers and realizes there was nothing but hate from her mother and father for sixteen years.

Precious has a counseling session with her mother. Mary tells her how and when Carl abused her for the first time. It is a narcissistic incoherent mumble during which she paints herself to be a great mother that provided Precious with nice clothes and toys, giving her a happy carefree childhood filled with laughter. The falsehood of the dichotomy of her admitting to having knowledge of Carl raping her from a very young age, and desperate attempt to strip herself of all the blame as she was a "good mother," in her own words, is only strengthened by the reader's knowledge of Mary herself sexually abusing her, along with being complacent in her emotional and physical abuse, as well as not interfering in Precious being abused by Carl. She goes back and forth between admitting knowledge of the abuse and artificially throwing "good-mother" tropes around such as pink dresses and Precious dancing to a disco song and laughing. She also downplays Carl's violence towards her and Precious as Carl being a "high-natured man."

> 'When? I don't know when it start. When I remember it? She still little. Yeah, around three maybe. I give her a bottle. I still got milk in my bresses but not for her but from Carl sucking. I give him tittie, Precious bottle. Hygiene, you know?' […]
>
> Ms Weiss look like she done stopped breathing. […]
>
> Umm hmm, I was raised by a psycho maniac fool. […]
>
> 'So he on me. Then he reach over to Precious! Start wif his finger between her legs. I say Carl what you doing! He say shut your big ass up! This is good for her. Then he git off me, take off her Pampers and try to stick his thing in Precious. […] I say stop Carl stop! I want him on me! I never wanted him to hurt her. I didn't want him doing anything to her. I wanted my man for myself. Sex me up, not my chile. So you cain't blame all that shit happen to Precious on me.' (135-136)

Mary is displayed as a narcissistic delusional psychotic who is incapable of empathy or love. She is actively fighting against admitting reality, and taking responsibility for her crimes. Throughout this interaction, Precious faces one of her abusers, and in a brave, yet understandingly implicit way, she stands up to her mother's deceptions by expressing her emotions freely through her thoughts. Precious's stress responses vary throughout the novel. Contrary to the beginning when she primarily adopted the fawn and freeze responses, exhibiting

submissive behaviors that did not allow her to be proactive about her abuse, nevertheless, kept her alive as she knew she was in danger of being severely beaten, raped, or even killed; in the later stages of the novel, Precious uses both fight and flight responses much more, exhibiting her confidence and self-actualization growing, therefore she is able to stand up for herself, also because she now knows it is safe as she actually has a supportive group of friends whom she can turn to. As Borrego writes:

> The acquisition of literacy through the therapeutic method of diary journal writing, and accepted therapeutic practices such as the confrontation between daughter and mother, relieves Precious of her feeling of responsibility for the incest. In this face-to-face conversation, the mother admits to her daughter that she has been the victim of poor parenting, thus allowing Precious's plight towards liberation to start.[116]

Understandably, Precious reacts very badly to this meeting. She is panicked and dissociative. She is mad, sad, feels like she is breaking. She feels overwhelmed with emotions. She is hopeful because she finally has a support system. Nevertheless, her mother reminds her of how it can all disappear due to her illness, trauma, and CPTSD she must deal with. Then her house mother shows her some kindness by giving her a few dollars, and taking care of Abdul so she can get to her Body Positive meeting, to help with the HIV diagnosis, and she cries because it is all too much for her.

Kokkola writes: "More experienced readers, especially those familiar with the use of the term 'realism' in literary studies, will note the implicit warning: they should not anticipate a happy ending of the kind offered by *The Color Purple*."[117] Precious decides to put her story in a book. Abdul is not HIV positive. Precious changes her perspective about God, agreeing with *The Color Purple*'s Shug, God is in everything and everyone, he is kindness, love, and beauty in the world. Precious's reading skills improve substantially, and she has a newfound hope for the future. The novel's story ends with the image of Precious holding her son. The sun is shining, she feels warm and hopeful, tethered to the present moment. This ending suggests a realistic hopeful future that might however not be very long, and might encompass much difficulty and unpleasantness, given Precious's mental and physical health status. Fortunately, Precious is now fully aware of this reality and she is ready to face it.

[116] Borrego, "Re(Claiming) Subjectivity and Transforming the Politics of Silence through the Search for Wholeness in *Push* by Sapphire," 155.
[117] Kokkola, "Learning to Read Politically: Narratives of Hope and Narratives of Despair in *Push* by Sapphire," 395.

Despite the great effort Precious continuously exhibits throughout the book, realistically, there is a limit on how far she can go. Her literacy level, albeit greatly improved, will most likely never offer her a job that can give her a chance to climb the social ladder. Her HIV diagnosis, given the disease's early history and the infancy of its treatability at the temporal setting of the novel, will sooner or later develop into AIDS, which will consequently lead to her death.[118] After all, this is not only a speculation, but a fact confirmed in the sequel, *The Kid*. This all being said, the story of Precious Jones in all its tragedy and hardship, also constitutes a story of healing and possibilities. Precious's story proves that there is always hope for survivors of abuse, no matter how extreme their abuse has been.

[118] Kokkola, "Learning to Read Politically: Narratives of Hope and Narratives of Despair in *Push* by Sapphire," 394.

COMPARATIVE CHAPTER

The three previously analyzed novels share much. From the individual characters' journeys and life stories, through their psychology and circumstances, to the novels' forms, literary devices used, and the incentive of their creation. Truth be told, these books in both their content and circumstance of when or why they were published have as much in common as they do not. The overall topic of child sexual abuse is prevalent in each of them, yet even this most striking similarity is handled distinctly in all of them. From perspectives of the main characters to the behavior and support of their families and communities, or lack thereof, to the literary devices used to intimately acquaint the reader with the ins and outs of the stories. Each offer a unique viewpoint.

Firstly, all three books handle the issue of sexual violence with the seriousness required for such a topic. Celie, Pecola and Precious are all young African-American girls experiencing poverty and disfunction in their families and communities. Celie is fourteen when she is first raped by her stepfather. This only occurs when he has the opportunity to do so, once her mother becomes ill and is forced to leave him alone with her and the other children. This becomes a repetitive cycle of systematic and thought through violence with a pattern and a pre-prepared cover story by Pa. As a result of these attacks, Celie falls pregnant twice and subsequently becomes infertile. Celie's stepfather disposes of these two children, inducing in Celie the belief that they are dead, only to be corrected when she discovers they were adopted, and therefore are safe and taken care of.

Pecola is first raped when she is eleven, after she had just had her period for the first time. As the story is told from Cholly's point of view, the reader is provided with a unique clarity of intent and circumstance of his perversion. Supposedly, this is a spontaneous corruption of the senses, as he is inebriated, and in his affected confused state he forces himself on his daughter, unable to stop himself as the realization of the immorality of his actions only excites him further. Shortly after, her father rapes her for the second time, and the final, were the story to be believed. As a result of one of these attacks, Pecola becomes pregnant, but she experiences a miscarriage.

Precious is sexually abused from the age of approximately three years. This early abuse is recounted by her mother, therefore the accuracy of the account of the events might be put into question. Precious remembers being raped regularly as far back as seven years old. Though, she has memories of earlier abuse which come through during her intense flashbacks, she is

unable to date them. Her father, though delusional and attempting to excuse his behavior, is fully aware of his crimes. His actions are aided by the lack of protection from Precious's mother, who in fact is also sexually abusing her herself. Precious has two children by her father. Her daughter has Down Syndrome, as she had her when she was twelve, without any prenatal check-ups or care. Precious was sixteen when she had her son.

The temporal setting of all three novels is significant. It spans a large time period, from Celie's story happening in the early 1900s, Pecola's in 1941, to Precious's in the 1980s. Given this time progression, one can take notice of certain changes in the communities' (un)acceptance of the sexual abuse. In Celie's story, the topic of sexual abuse is considered a taboo, the only two people who know about it are Shug and Nettie. These two, given their close relationship to Celie, have shown her empathy regarding both the abuse she has suffered at the hands of her stepfather and her husband. Yet there is no outrage or general disapproval of such behavior from the greater community precisely because it is taboo.

In Pecola's story, the topic is considered abhorrent, yet people discuss it. No matter the flaws of such discussions, such as victim blaming or disbelief, the community is aware of the crime. Claudia even feels empathy and a sense of complacency for her suffering, albeit years later when the damage has already been done.

In Precious's story, the topic is a widespread issue. People are not only aware of it, but have built safeguards in order to prevent it, help the victim, and to punish the perpetrator. The system is still deeply flawed, but it is in place. Even though it fails Precious for a prolonged period of her childhood, it eventually achieves what it was designed to do in the first place. It aids Precious in her recovery and helps her live a normal life, or as close to it as she can get.

The geographical setting also bears significance. Celie's story is set in the south, historically the poorest and most disadvantageous place to be for an African-American person. This is shown in the kind of housing, clothes, and general means Celie has, as well as the hard work she and other characters in the book are forced to do to survive. Pecola's story is set in Ohio, which is historically a "purple" state, meaning it is known to vote for both democrats and republicans. As this is the case, it stands to reason that it represents the middle ground in terms of resources provided for the black community, and women and children who are victims of abuse. A mostly "blue," democratic, state and city like New York, is able to provide many more programs and services to the aforementioned communities, as it is the most liberal, progressive, and wealthy.

The topic of age is very important. Celie is fourteen when the abuse begins. Therefore, her situation is seemingly least severe compared to Pecola and Precious. Arguably, Celie's situation is the most severe. Though unaware of the extent of the actions of her stepfather's brutality, Celie possesses cognitive ability incomparable to Pecola and Precious, precisely due to her age and development. She is also fully conscious during the attacks and vividly remembers both the emotional and physical pain she experienced. Also given her perceived "maturity," she is essentially sold into marriage to Albert. Hence her age makes her much more vulnerable to further sexual victimization, not only behind closed doors, but fully endorsed by the societal standards of marriage and so-called wife duties.

Pecola is eleven, which puts her in the middle, so to speak. Pecola's situation is specific given her traumatization preceding the sexual abuse she has suffered. Given the neglect and abuse from her mother and father, and the overall exposure to the adversative experiences during her early childhood, Pecola is uniquely adapted for victimization of the sexual kind. Her lack of education concerning the topic of sex and her own body, along with emotional immaturity and stunted state produced by her parents vitriol only add to her traumatization. This already fragile psychological state is completely shattered once her father rapes her. Though mostly unconscious during the attack, Pecola remembers enough to be seriously affected by it.

Precious is three, which makes her the youngest. This along with the longevity of the abuse arguably makes her experience the most severe. Though she does not remember the abuse occurring before the age of seven as vividly as the rest, her traumatization is the most thorough and far-reaching. As is evident from her incredibly debilitating flashbacks and psychosomatic symptoms that have been ever-present throughout her life impeding her education, development, and general existence.

Though all certainly flawed to say the least, the mothers in these three novels are very much unlike. Celie's mother is portrayed as the most innocent. Seemingly unaware of any sexual abuse occurring, she does show signs of being a protective mother. Being guilty of "only" emotional abuse on her part, as far as we know, she is the most caring or in the very least, the least abusive one out of the three.

Pecola's mother is a huge leap from Celie's, as she is neglectful and hateful of her children. She abuses them emotionally and physically on daily basis, which is in stark contrast to her treatment of the white child she takes care of as part of her work obligations. Not to mention her abusive relationship with Pecola's father, with its many fights and unashamed

display of sexual activity in front of their children. Pecola's mother also becomes aware of the sexual abuse once Pecola informs her about it. She is not only disbelieving of it occurring, but she punishes Pecola, beating her severely for the crimes of her father, and to a certain extent her own neglect and complacency in the ordeal.

Precious's mother is the worst in this comparison. Not only is she fully aware of the abuse happening as she has born witness to it from the very beginning, and therefore, she is complacent in allowing it to continue, she is sexually abusing Precious herself. This, of course, makes her the most despicable by any measurable means. She abuses Precious emotionally, physically, and sexually, constantly berating her and gaslighting her into a state of utter helplessness and hopelessness.

In terms of the father figures, there is not as much nuance there as is present with the mothers. Celie's Pa is not her biological father, only her stepfather, which statistically speaking makes him the most probable perpetrator out of the three.[119] Pecola's father is the least likely, hence the most vile, as he is not only her biological father, but he has watched her grow since she was a baby. He has been in her life every single day since the day she was born, raising her, though the quality is questionable. Precious's father, similarly to Pecola's, was also very present in her life. He is her biological father, which also makes him the biological father of her children, making his acts of incest even more reprehensible as his crimes imprint into the gene code of Precious's children.

The children, albeit the products of rape, play an important role in these stories. Celie's children are one of very few major sources of hope for her. Their wellbeing and perhaps one day reuniting with them is what keeps her going throughout the book. It is not their existence that is traumatic for her, as one might assume due to being a reminder of her stepfather's cruelty, it is their absence in her life. It is at least partially for this reason that Pecola loses her grasp on reality and the severe psychosis she suffers from has a chance to take hold of her. Pecola miscarries, she does not even get to have the child. Perhaps it is for the best as her psyche was already in a state of disarray before the miscarriage, but it very well might be why her life, as opposed to Celie and Precious, essentially ends at the point of her losing her child, freezing her in place and time for the rest of her life. Precious's main strength becomes her son. It is for him that she strives to better herself and heal. Although, she has lost her daughter, as due to her condition she is unable to take care of her properly, Abdul saves her.

[119] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 16.

The community surrounding the three heroines represent the make-or-break paradigm, mostly and more likely the break element. Celie is perhaps the most isolated out of the three. Except for her sister and mother, she does not have anyone who is close to her. In the peripheral community, except for the teacher, who comes to check up on her once her stepfather takes her out of school, there is no one. Even this teacher takes one look at her pregnant belly and leaves, making no inquiry, providing no help. Once Celie is married to Albert, his sister Kate attempts to liberate her, but Albert gets rid of her instead.

Pecola's surrounding community is in itself dysfunctional. Claudia and Frieda's parents, albeit miles away from the level of decay of the Breedloves, are defective in many ways. Therefore, it stands to reason that when Pecola needs help from her community, the MacTeers do not provide it. Apart from the MacTeers, there are the three prostitutes, Geraldine, the white family her mother works for, and the charlatan pedophile, all of whom supply only further traumatization instead of aid.

Precious's community or rather the people she meets throughout the story are once again mostly complacent in her suffering. From the neighbors who know her mother is emotionally and physically abusing her, and also know she is pregnant at the age of twelve yet do nothing to prevent further abuse, through the teachers in her school who somehow allowed her to get to the ninth grade despite being completely illiterate and pregnant twice, yet they do not call social services, to the cops who despite knowing her father raped her and impregnated, do nothing.

This changes once Celie and Precious are given support and engage in healing relationships with members of their communities. Celie receives support mainly from two women in her life. Her sister Nettie, from whom she is estranged for most of her life, and whose support is only theoretical or in the very least distant through her letters. And Shug Avery, a woman thanks to whom she discovers her identity and her voice. Initially, only a friend with whom Celie is enamored with, Shug eventually becomes Celie's lover and life partner. It is because of her relationship with Shug, she begins to heal from the abuse she has suffered at the hands of her stepfather and her husband.

Pecola is completely deprived of this healing relationship and support in general. She has no one who cares for her or loves her. She was all alone. This along with her miscarriage is the reason for her story ending in an irrevocable tragedy.

Precious has Ms. Rain. She and the girls in her class become her primary support group. Ms. Rain shows her empathy for the first time in her life. Her perspective on what Precious has

been through gives Precious the opportunity to stand up for herself and finally fight back against the hold of her abusers. Later in the story she also has the Survivors of Incest Anonymous group, the Body Positivity group and her house mother who support her on her journey of recovery.

From a literary standpoint, these three books offer even more diversity. *The Bluest Eye* being published first in 1970, *The Color Purple* in 1982, and finally *Push* in 1996 – all experienced at least a ten-year gap in between them. This alone is significant. When Toni Morrison had written and published *The Bluest Eye* in the early 70s, she was a pioneer in the topic she had decided to battle in her fiction. Not many authors before Morrison had the courage to venture into the darkness of child sexual abuse and the story of its survivors. In general, child sexual abuse had not been much written about before the 1970s. When it was, it certainly did not involve retelling of the story by a survivor themselves, let alone a black female survivor. This void of literary exploration was only partially filled, if one can call it that, by books telling the story of the abusers, such as *Lolita* (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov, which is highly problematic especially for the members of the survivorship community. Morrison, therefore, was presented with a huge responsibility and challenge to "get it right," so to speak. Her achievement is even more impressive, once one considers *The Bluest Eye* was the first book she had ever written.

The Color Purple published during the final years of the second wave of feminism which afforded Alice Walker and other writers of her era the building blocks upon which they could approach such a topic with a much more heightened state of confidence than, for example, Morrison. If Morrison was a pioneer, Alice Walker was a follower who delved further into the topic of child sexual abuse. With a much more personal approach, she was able to open Celie's journey, to allow the reader to step into her shoes and undergo what she did. Both Walker and Sapphire manage this in their work. This is important because as Liddell writes:

> By giving voice to the victim herself—a phenomenon virtually unheard of in Black sociological, or imaginative literature—the root causes of the incest are interrogated and the agency of this violence is spread as far as possible.[120]

When *Push* came along, it became representative of the new era of feminism in the US. According to Borrego, "it is Sapphire's emphasis on telling the story from the point of view of

[120] Yakini B. Kemp, Janice Lee Liddell, *Arms Akimbo: Africana Women in Contemporary Literature*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999, 137.

the Black woman/child suffering from incest and rape that makes this novel unique."[121] Both with its choice of vernacular language usage and meta references to not only *The Color Purple*, but also many other black cultural and literary icons such as Audre Lorde and Aretha Franklin. As Sapphire explained:

> I wanted to let this whole new generation who's [going to] read *Push* know that it was born out of *The Color Purple* and the other books I mention. I don't think I could have written *Push* if Alice Walker had not written *The Color Purple,* or if Toni Morrison had not written *The Bluest Eye.* They kicked open the door.[122]

In terms of format and style, *The Bluest Eye* could be perceived as a narrative inside another narrative, or a story in a story. By switching in between present and past references, along with switching in between narrators, the story gives the impression of the aforementioned choice of style. The novel is incredibly layered both in its temporal references and the stories of individual characters in it. So much so that at times the reader may not be entirely certain at what level they have appeared, or what this particular section of the story wants us to focus on or what it really is about, seeing as definitively determining this is sometimes impossible. As Wagner writes:

> Rendering the novel through a lens of complex narrative aesthetics, she invites readers into the cultural politics of race, gender, class, age, and even religion to entertain new readings of the text of their own lives, the nation, and the global community.[123]

Morrison's use of fragmented narrative allows her to keep the reader's attention on the topic at hand, yet simultaneously it prevents them from being overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation Pecola is in. By switching back and forth, Morrison is also able to present multiple "realities" of many different characters, all of whom have a different backstory and have found themselves in vastly different circumstances. The main narrator of Pecola's story is Claudia, the first-person narrator of the novel. Claudia, due to a number of factors, represents the opposite of Pecola. Most importantly, she is supported by a loving family, and she is given the gift, by Morrison, to narrate not only hers, but Pecola's story. Claudia's voice "doubles in strength and she asserts responsibility over her own life by assuming responsibility for the

[121] Borrego, "Re(Claiming) Subjectivity and Transforming the Politics of Silence through the Search for Wholeness in *Push* by Sapphire," 154.
[122] Mark Marvel, "Sapphire's Big Push," <https://web.archive.org/web/20080310212513/http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_n6_v26/ai_18450196>.
[123] Graham and Hutchinson, *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 231.

narration of the story."[124] Alternating between a first-person narrator and a third-person omniscient narrator allows Morrison the freedom to preserve a modicum of innocence while at the same time covering the very dark and sordid histories of characters such as Pauline and Cholly without any temporal or spatial limitations of knowledge on the part of the narrator.

Furthermore, Morrison masterfully manages the often sudden transition from a lyrically colored line to a character's vernacular in the span of usually only a single page. This makes the story both highly aesthetic and incredibly intimate. Morrison's choices in retelling Pecola's story are strikingly calculated. One can perceive that in the very fact that the reader never actually gets to observe the story from Pecola's point of view, except for one part of the story in which Pecola is having a conversation with an imaginary friend of hers, the existence of which is entirely unreliable, too. Perhaps even better example of Morrison's resolve to utilize the writing style itself to produce a greater emotional impact on the reader is her decision to narrate a rape scene from the perspective of the rapist and not the victim as is usually the custom. This decision, though controversial and potentially problematic, offers the reader the opportunity to be sickened and overcome with emotions they would never expect in reading such a scene. Rape is brutal, violating, incarcerating. It invokes feelings of terror, helplessness, powerlessness, hopelessness, and empathy for the victim. Morrison's choice, in addition to the already mentioned spectrum, brings out feelings of abhorrence, indignation, outrage, impotence, horror and sympathy on behalf of the victim. All of which do not deprive the act of its seriousness, to the contrary they enhance it. In a twisted way, Morrison stripping the victim of any expression, and instead providing the perpetrator with a safe space to tell his side of the story, makes Pecola's story so much more powerful than it would have been otherwise, were she the one to narrate her own rape. Even though this power struggle expressed in the writing creates an apparent paradox on the page, it, nonetheless, works perfectly. This decision strengthens Pecola's voicelessness and frailty. Even in the one moment when most victims get to have their voice and tell their story, Morrison takes even this away from her, leaving her with nothing, but her irreversible tragedy. Through Morrison's choices, Pecola becomes the one who is "always observed, but never observing; forever acted on, but never acting; spoken about, but never speaking."[125]

In *The Color Purple*, Walker tackles a weighty topic with a grace and an apparent ease that can only be present because feminism or rather womanism, and women themselves

[124] Ropp, "Troubling Survivorism in *The Bluest Eye*," 138.
[125] Ropp, "Troubling Survivorism in *The Bluest Eye*," 138.

constitute an important topic for Walker. Morrison is interested in the black experience as a whole, she never pushed back against being categorized as a black writer as she said she is writing for black people.[126] Walker, more specifically, is passionate about the lives of black women, their struggles, their triumphs, the injustice and discrimination they face simply by living in black female bodies. *The Color Purple* is an example of that passion. The book uses a first-person narrative in the style of an epistolary novel. The focus of the book is primarily Celie and her communication with God and her sister Nettie through letters. Cutter writes: "In these letters Celie begins to create a resistant narratological version of events that ultimately preserves her subjectivity and voice."[127] That is not to say that the book dismisses the stories of other characters. On the contrary, the book is not only a story of Celie, but also her sister and to a lesser extent Sophia and the other characters present in the novel. All of them have a purpose in Celie's story. It is precisely the epistolary form that seamlessly mimics the lives of actual people, thus providing a fictional story with a sense of realism that aids to cover up the characters' fictional nature. As Roshnavand writes:

> Walker did not intend her novel just to portray the suffering of an abused black woman. Instead, she meant to depict how a repressed rape victim can survive the trauma, rise from the ashes and turn into a savior who can help transform and rescue not only the oppressed, but also the oppressors.[128]

Nonetheless, Celie is the protagonist and as such Walker uses her letter writing as a form of reaching out to the reader. It draws the reader into the universe of the novel without any need for an omniscient narrator. Although, Celie's account of the events of her life and the lives that she observes is subjective, it does not take away from the credibility of her retelling the story. The letters become a means for Celie to tell her story. In many ways, letter writing resembles the act of journaling which is considered one of the most effective ways of healing trauma.[129] Walker's choice of the epistolary form is significant because it intrinsically works as a tool in Celie's recovery. The format essentially strengthens the focus of the novel, which is child sexual abuse. Walker utilizes the length and depth of description of the letters to directly reflect Celie's journey and development. Initially, Celie's letters are short mirroring her post-

[126] Hermione Hoby, "I'm writing for black people … I don't have to apologize," *The Guardian.com*, Guardian Media Group, 25 Apr 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/25/toni-morrison-books-interview-god-help-the-child> 22 June 2022.
[127] Cutter, "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*," 166.
[128] Roshnavand, "Rape as Catalyst to Epistolary Discourse and Womanist Bonding: Alice Walker's Reconstructive Strategy in *The Color Purple*," 20.
[129] Bagley and King, *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing*, 145.

traumatic existence and stunted development. Her usage of vernacular in combination with poor grammar and spelling for Celie's written language demonstrate her lack of education, moreover they make Celie endearing and sympathetic. Once Celie begins to heal, her letters become longer and more detailed. Celie "becomes as flexible, open, and continually evolving as the language she uses."[130] At this point, letters are not only means of survival for her, they become a way for Celie to express her joy and happiness. Walker also wields this tool when she wants to show Celie in a regressive state, for example when Celie discovers Nettie might be dead. She along with her writing deteriorate into a former sense of self. This is shown more overtly when Celie discovers Shug's affair with a young boy and she is too heartbroken and overwhelmed by her emotions to speak, so she writes her a note as a means of communication. As Cheung writes: "Her note, to be sure, is also a clever way to go from mute acceptance to verbal command."[131] In this exchange, even though she is unable to speak due to her triggered traumatized state, Celie is able to find a way for her voice to be heard. Walker's choice of letter writing with its progressively found depth of detail and joy on Celie's journey builds up the happy ending that is inevitably waiting for Celie. Walker crafts Celie into a fully realized independent woman who has overcome her status as a victim and proudly lives as a survivor.

> Celie, gratified by her newfound rhetorical talent and her increasing mastery of language, evolves along with her writing from a little girl baffled by what is happening to her to a self-aware and understanding woman, from a passive recorder of unstructured facts to a conscious artist.[132]

In *Push*, Sapphire chose the method of direct retelling of her protagonist's life story. Through a process which very closely resembles the process of journaling, *Push* combines many different writing devices. From direct first-person narration that is ever-present in the book, it jumps from prose to poetry, to letter correspondence. All these formats collaboratively aid one another in Sapphire's attempt to retain the story's authenticity and emotional power. In its structure and style, *Push* stands in direct contrast to *The Bluest Eye. The Bluest Eye* in its lyricism and sense of rigorousness in upholding the format of the novel reads much more like fiction than *Push* which presents Precious's story as directly and unrestrictedly as possible, thus presenting itself as an almost fully factual non-fiction story would. Due to the abrupt leaps from the present moment into the past brought about by the overwhelmingly debilitating flashbacks Precious experiences, it often reads as an unedited stream of consciousness. This combined

[130] Rainwater, *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, 159.
[131] Cheung, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*," 165.
[132] Cheung, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*," 170.

with Precious's use of vernacular, her own spelling, and "incorrect" grammar, all add to the genuineness of her story.

Sapphire's literary efforts far outreach the purely artistic space. Out of the three subjects of this analysis, Sapphire is the only author who has written her work with a direct goal in mind, to enact social change.

> I wrote about fathers who rape their children not to shock, but with the hope that that behavior could be stopped. I wrote about obesity and illiteracy not to evoke disgust or pity, but to invoke empathy and a call to action. I wanted to show the dark caves of ignorance and fear that poverty and abuse can cause human beings, us, to live in. I wanted to show how through commitment to art, education, and love we have the possibility of coming from our most damaged selves into our full potential as human beings in this lifetime, in this generation, now.[133]

Push with its references, its incredibly personal first-person "journaling" style of narration, along with its unashamed usage of black vernacular undoubtedly follows in the footsteps of *The Color Purple*. That is not to say that *The Bluest Eye* has not had an impact on Sapphire or the book itself. One might say that the carefully crafted language choices of Toni Morrison are only reflected in Sapphire's attempts at authenticating Precious's voice and mindfully polishing her speech to the point where it tricks the reader into believing it is not in fact polished at all.

Precious's view of writing differs much from that of Celie. For Celie, writing letters to God is the only way to tell her story, it is the last hope for her. Celie's letters are not intended for a large readership, nor are they consciously written as a means to heal her trauma. Precious, on the other hand, purposefully uses writing to tell her story to the world. All the while using it as a means for her recovery. Even though both protagonists are unsure of what they are doing at the beginning of their writing journey, Celie's aim to communicate with God, and later on her sister, remains the same throughout the novel. Precious, however, develops through her writing. This is especially visible in the disappearance of her skepticism, which is on full display at the beginning of her writing journey. She becomes literate and gains confidence through her writing. Writing and reading, hence the many literary references, for Precious becomes a source of strength and inspiration that she can then use in the real world. For Celie, writing works the

[133] McNeil, et al, "'Going After Something Else': Sapphire on the Evolution from *Push* to *Precious* and *The Kid*," 356.

other way around. Once she gains strength and confidence from the relationships and triumphs of her real life, this then shows directly in her writing.

As opposed to Walker, who was influenced in her writing in a much more implicit way, Sapphire was not afraid to be explicitly inspired by her predecessors. So much so that she made Precious read *The Color Purple* and make it her favorite book. This is significant because she does not merely mention the book once or twice, Sapphire makes it one of the tools that help Precious survive, give her strength and support. The multiple references to Walker's work as well as many others further increase *Push*'s relatability and a grounding present feeling of the novel. This very modern feeling of the novel makes it more approachable than the works of Sapphire's predecessors.

One thing that Walker and Sapphire have in common is the criticism of their work by certain members of the black community. Sapphire even mentions this in *Push* when Ms. Rain informs Precious about the negative criticism *The Color Purple* has received. Sapphire addressed this criticism thusly:

> Would *Crime and Punishment* have been written if Dostoevsky had felt he had to confine himself to "positive images" of Russian youth? Would we have Kafka's *Metamorphosis* if he had felt he could only present "positive images" of the Jewish family? To say that an artist's job is to produce "positive images" is to assign them the role of propagandist.
>
> We have a tremendous amount of choice in what we read. Nothing stops African Americans who desire certain kinds of depictions of African Americans from reading (or writing) those texts that satisfy their desires and "needs." That said, I think valiant young Precious, striving to learn to read and write, and care for her child, might be seen as "positive."[134]

[134] McNeil, et al, "'Going After Something Else': Sapphire on the Evolution from *Push* to *Precious* and *The Kid*," 353.

CONCLUSION

Child sexual abuse is often not talked about and/or silenced altogether. Both in real life and in fiction, it is extremely challenging to let the narratives of abuse be heard, especially if they are told by survivors themselves. The subjects of this analysis are three black girls. It is true that sexual abuse can affect anyone and due to the widespread nature of the phenomenon, indeed does affect everyone, victims or others. Yet it is also true that black women, especially poor young black girls are disproportionately more marginalized, and therefore, in greater danger than the rest of the society. Girls just like Celie, Pecola and Precious are in danger of not receiving proper care and support, of not being believed, of being victim blamed, all because of the unjust prejudices that have prevailed in our society for hundreds of years.

I set out to study these works of fiction, with the primary goal to analyze their value in educating the general public, as well as soothing the pain of the survivorship community. These novels offer a wide range of diverse narratives, mirroring the real life stories of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. That much is made clear in the analysis of this thesis which proves the novels' authentic depiction of the topic of child sexual abuse.

All three novels analyzed in this thesis offer a plethora of content. Be it content of psychological, soothing nature of comradeship for any survivor, or the strictly literary kind for enthusiasts of belles lettres, reading them holds boundless worth for any reader who happens to stumble upon their pages.

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