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**THE THEME OF CHILDHOOD AS THE WAY OF  
GAINING EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE  
IN THE NOVEL *GOD HELP THE CHILD* BY T.  
MORRISON**

**Abstract**

The article deals with the theme of childhood. The purpose of the article is to analyze the theme of childhood and upbringing as the way of personality formation, as well as to determine the function of magical realism in the novel *God Help the Child*. The object of research has been chosen because it is through it that one can understand the specifics of the psychology of the African American child and the philosophical aspect of the work. The comprehensive research methodology has been used in the work: the synthesis of the comparative historical method, holistic analysis, elements of mythopoetic and hermeneutic methods. Poststructuralist approaches are taken into account, as well as the “close reading” technique. The article analyzes the childhood as the way of obtaining existential experience, which gives an opportunity to form a character and make one’s own choice in life. It is proved that the main idea of the novel is revealed through the main and secondary images of children from different families and with different principles of education, through archetypal allusions, and the fragmentation and multifacetedness of the composition. It is revealed that the main character’s tragedy is that she is “too black” for the society in which she lives. This is an objective fact that determines the specifics of the psychology of African American child, which does not depend on the literature heroine herself and which she

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cannot correct. However, not all life's difficulties can be overcome by realizing one's path. But, despite all vicissitudes of fate, childhood traumas and misfortunes, the protagonist of the novel overcomes her inner fear of the past, realizes her guilt and thus becomes a strong, formed personality. The character gets "a second chance" to define her life path precisely due to the author's use of the element of magical realism. It is shown that the problematic manifestation of the individual's social behavior is caused by the fact that its sociocultural transformation takes place in conditions of serious personal and social contradictions and obstacles of the objective and subjective nature.

**Keywords:** *theme, childhood, image, personality formation, existential experience, life path, magical realism.*

#### **Анотація**

**Н. Бондар. ТЕМА ДИТИНСТВА ЯК ЗАСОБУ ЗДОБУТТЯ ЕКЗИСТЕНЦІАЛЬНОГО ДОСВІДУ В РОМАНІ Т. МОРРИСОН «БОЖЕ, БЕРЕЖИ МОЄ ДИТЯ»**

У романі розглядається тема дитинства як засобу здобуття екзистенціального досвіду. Мета статті – аналіз теми дитинства та виховання як шляхи формування особистості, а також визначення функції магічного реалізму у романі "Боже, бережи моє дитя". Цей об'єкт дослідження обраний тому, що саме через нього можна досягнути специфіку психології афроамериканської дитини та філософський аспект твору. У роботі використано комплексну дослідницьку методологію: синтез порівняльно-історичного методу, цілісного аналізу, елементи герменевтичного методу. Враховувалися постструктуралістські підходи, а також техніка "close reading". У статті визначено роль теми дитинства у формуванні особистості "з протилежності", тобто всупереч сучасній негативній ситуації. Доведено, що ця основна ідея

розкривається через головні та другорядні образи дітей із різних сімей та з різними принципами виховання, через архетипні алюзії, через фрагментарність та багатоплановість композиції. Виявлено, що трагедія головної героїні полягає в тому, що вона народилася надто чорною для соціуму, в якому живе. Це об'єктивна даність, що визначає специфіку психології афроамериканської дитини, яка не залежить від самої героїні і яку вона не може виправити. Проте не всі життєві труднощі можна подолати, усвідомивши свій шлях. Але, незважаючи на всі перипетії долі, дитячі травми та нещастя, головна героїня роману перемагає внутрішній страх перед минулим, усвідомлює свою провину і таким чином стає сильною особистістю, що сформувалася наперекір всьому. “Другий шанс” визначення свого життєвого шляху персонаж отримує саме за рахунок використання автором елемента магічного реалізму. Показано, що проблемність прояву соціальної поведінки індивідуума обумовлена тим, що її соціокультурна трансформація відбувається в умовах серйозних особистісних та соціальних протиріч та перешкод об'єктивного та суб'єктивного характеру.

**Ключові слова:** *тема, дитинство, образ, формування особистості, екзистенціальний досвід, життєвий шлях, магічний реалізм.*

### **Introduction**

Toni Morrison (Chloe Ardelia Wofford) is a prominent representative of African American literature, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the author of novels, short stories and children's literature. Many Ukrainian literary scholars have turned to the work of this writer (Vysotska, 2010; Denysova, 2012; Kravets, 2016; Podkorytova, 2023, and others), in particular to the novel *Beloved*

(Bilonozhko, 2005; Komynska, 2011; 2016; Telegina, Khrystuk 2019, and others).

Toni Morrison's latest novel, *God Help the Child*, caused a widespread dispute, some critics found it much weaker than the previous ones; nevertheless, this work attracted the attention of many literary scholars abroad (Charles, 2015; Muyumba, 2015; Rifkind, 2015; Williams, 2019; Willson, 2019). The following aspects have been explored in this novel: childhood trauma and child abuse (Bouacida, 2021; Manuela, 2016; Salahuddin, Babo, 2019; Yan, 2017), a motherhood theme (Vinayakaselvi, Arunmozhi, 2020), the conflict between a parent and a child (Fraser, 2019; Senapati, 2019), the conflict between people of the opposite sex (Ford, 2019), the aspect of colorism (Gras, 2016; Makwana, 2021; Watson, 2019), the manifestations of alienation and neurosis (Noor, Hantoosh, 2023), the various forms of submission (Mashaqi, Omari, 2018); a psychogeographic analysis has been carried out (Bougherira, 2020). In their article "Polyphony of Tony Morrison's *God Help the Child*" J. Zayed and S. Maseeh have explored the novel in the light of M. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism (Zayed, Maseeh, 2016). However, among the unsolved problems associated with the study of the novel *God Help the Child*, it is necessary to highlight the analysis of not only the main children's images, but also secondary ones, and also to identify the role of the theme of childhood in the formation of the personality "of contraries," that is, in spite of the current negative situation. This determines the originality of the development of the theme of obtaining existential experience in Tony Morrison's novel and the relevance and scientific novelty of this article.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the theme of childhood and upbringing as the way of personality formation, as well as to determine the function of magical realism in the novel *God Help the Child*. The object of research has been

chosen because it is through it that one can understand the specifics of the psychology of the African American child and the philosophical aspect of the work.

### **Methodology and Methods**

The comprehensive research methodology has been used in the work: the synthesis of the comparative historical method, holistic analysis, and some elements of mythopoetic and hermeneutic methods. Poststructuralist approaches are taken into account, as well as the “close reading” technique.

### **Results and Discussions**

T. Morrison’s *God Help the Child* explores mother-child relationships, childhood trauma, violence, racial prejudice, and interracial discrimination. This is one story that every African American can relate to. The protagonist, Lula Ann Bridewell, who shortened her name after the age of sixteen to Bride (perhaps reflecting unconscious desire for her family, where love will reign), works as a regional manager for a large cosmetics company. But the memory of childhood traumas and perjury against an innocent teacher does not allow her to live quietly. The novel consists of four parts, each one is divided into several voices: first we hear Lula May, who forced her daughter to call her Sweetness, then her daughter, Bride, her friend Brooklyn, the wrongfully convicted teacher Sophia, the girl Rain, who ran away from her mother, and narrator’s voice. These voices intertwine and reveal the picture of events from different points of view. Quite rightfully J. Zayed and S. Maseeh call the novel polyphonic in the article “Polyphony of Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*”: “The present paper adopts a qualitative approach for studying Toni Morrison’s novel *God Help the Child* in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. According to this theory, it can be claimed that this novel is polyphonic (i.e., multi-voiced)” (Zayed, Maseeh, 2016). In the novel’s review Walton Muyumba considers, that when

studying this work one should keep in mind jazz, and points out the similarity in the title with the song Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child": "It's worth keeping Jazz in mind while parsing this novel; it's hard to read it without recalling the title of one of Billie Holiday's signature songs, "God Bless the Child", "That's probably no accident: *God Help the Child* celebrates characters who achieve selfhood in spite of childhood suffering", "*God Help the Child* is a tragicomic jazz opera played out in four parts. Part I reads like a choral prelude: There are nine sections, each driven by an individual voice, as if Sweetness, Bride, Brooklyn, and Sofia were trading improvised solos. Part II contains four sections: two told by an omniscient third person narrator and one each for Sofia and Rain. Part III is devoted entirely to Booker's backstory, told by the anonymous third-person narrator. And Part IV is made up of three sections: Brooklyn returns for a solo; the anonymous third person narrates Booker's reunion with Bride; and Sweetness closes the show with a final flourish" (Muyumba, 2015).

The novel *God Help the Child* begins with an epigraph from the Gospel: "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not (Luke 18:16)". The theme of childhood is one of the main themes of this work: all problems in adult life are associated with childhood traumas. Childhood is the beginning and defining model of all life, and therefore this theme was the leading one in all world literature of the New Age, and remained at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (and will undoubtedly also develop further). The image of a child belongs to the fundamental archetypes at both the psychological and general cultural levels. The main theme of childhood appears in this novel in the memories of Bride, Booker, Sophie and Brooklyn about their own childhood and the girl Rain, who ran away from her mother and found a shelter with strangers. The motif of a child absorbs all the signs of childhood, the entire "childish"

spectrum in the adult world: trying to cope with her childhood traumas, Bride notices that she is turning into a child.

The novel begins with light-skinned Lula Mae's story about the birth of her daughter with a tar-colored skin: "She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I can think of yet her hair doesn't go with the skin. It's different – straight but curly like those naked tribes in Australia" (Morrison, 2015). She is so frightened by her blackness that for a second, she wants to get rid of her: "I know I went crazy for a minute because once – just for a few seconds – I held a blanket over her face and pressed" (Morrison, 2015). Of course, first of all, the fear of her daughter's future pushes Lula Mae to this criminal thought (after all, because of the color of her skin, she will experience all the cruelty of society), but she does not dare to commit a crime, and she has the idea of giving the girl away to an orphanage, but then, she still decides to raise her daughter, although she refuses to breastfeed her: "All I know is that for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat. I went to bottle-feeding soon as I got home" (Morrison, 2015). Lula Ann's father got back off the rails and, upon seeing the girl, accuses his wife of unfaithfulness, they begin to quarrel, and eventually the marriage falls apart. However, after a while, as if coming to his senses, he begins to send money every month, but has no intention of returning to the family or taking care of his daughter. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader understands that the newborn girl is deprived of her parents' love. Since the mother blames her daughter for her troubles and problems (her husband left her, it is difficult to rent a house, her acquaintances, bending over the baby carriage, frown and jump back), so she treats her child like someone else's one. The novel provides vivid examples of the

manifestation of racist sentiments in American society at the end of the twentieth century. Mother and her daughter feel neglect and rejection from society. Lula Mae forbids Lula Ann to call her “mom”, and orders the daughter to call her Sweetness (a subconscious desire to sweeten her bitter fate). Mother thinks she is doing the right thing by bringing up Lula Ann strictly: “I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble” (Morrison, 2015). In her opinion, if not for her upbringing, Lula Ann would not have become a regional manager of a large cosmetics company and would not have headed one of the up-to-date cosmetic lines. In the archetypal context, the motif of “good guardians” (wise parents), “mentors”, “teachers” is subject to deformation: the father refuses to accept the child, the mother deprives the daughter of her love. Father (other archetypal options – a wise old man, a sorcerer/a shaman) is an extremely important figure in the mythopoetic locus of home, where he largely provides a positively marked chronotope (stability, confidence in future, etc.). Thus, the girl, left without a father (“guardian”), was forced to endure hardships and misfortunes in childhood. After leaving school, Lula Ann Bridewell shortens her name to Bride, and it seems to her that with a new name the whole world is open to her. Despite negative circumstances, she gets a good job and even tries to make her appearance work for herself: she wears clothes only in white shades to complement her skin color. However, the memory of her childhood, especially perjury against an innocent teacher, haunts her.

Lula Ann’s childhood is filled with traumatic experiences regarding skin color and maternal love. When a girl starts going to school, she faces her classmates’ alienation and rejection: “Just like later in school when other curses – with mysterious definitions but clear meanings – were hissed or shouted at me.

Coon. Topsy. Clinkertop. Sambo. Ooga booga. Ape sounds and scratching of the sides, imitating zoo monkeys. One day a girl and three boys heaped a bunch of bananas on my desk and did their monkey imitations. They treated me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper” (Morrison, 2015). She endures all the bullying and does not complain to the teacher, realizing that if she complains about one of white children, she will be expelled from school. Subsequently, she realizes that overcoming these difficulties turned out to be useful: Bride achieves her goal, and she becomes a dark-skinned beauty: “... actually, was a good thing now I think of it, because I built up immunity so tough that not being a “nigger girl” was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn’t need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a deathlike pallor” (Morrison, 2015). And everyone who teased her in childhood is now looking at her with admiration.

But classmates are half of the trouble. The main tragedy is that Lula Ann’s mother does not love her and is disgusted by her. The girl is surrounded by a frightening atmosphere at home; she doesn’t know what to say or how to say it, and doesn’t have time to keep up with how the rules are changing: “Leave the spoon in the cereal bowl or place it next to the bowl; tie her shoelaces with a bow or a double knot; fold her socks down or pull them straight up to the calf? What were the rules and when did they change?” (Morrison, 2015). Sweetness tries not to touch her daughter, even when giving her a bath. The girl prays for her mother to touch her; she makes all sorts of mistakes so that her mother will slap or spank her. But the mother finds other ways of punishment, just not to touch her: “I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated – bed without supper, lock me in my room – but her screaming at me was the worst” (Morrison, 2015). These life troubles turn Lula Ann into a manipulative child. For the sake of

her mother's touch, she agrees to give perjure in court: a young teacher is accused of child molestation. The girl is only eight, but she thinks that if she speaks in court, her mother's attitude towards her will change. The testimony about Sophia Huxley's harassment is given by four children, who are hugged and encouraged by a social worker and a psychologist. Lulu Ann is not hugged, but they smile at her tenderly, even her mother smiles, and this is enough for her to decide to deceive: "I glanced at Sweetness; she was smiling like I've never seen her smile before – with mouth and eyes. And that wasn't all. Outside the courtroom all the mothers smiled at me, and two actually touched and hugged me. Fathers gave me thumbs-up. Best of all was Sweetness" (Morrison, 2015). Lula Ann turns out to be right in her expectations: after the trial, mother takes the girl by the hand for the first time in her life. Poor Lula Ann is very happy, she feels that Sweetness is becoming "kind of motherlike" (Morrison, 2015). After the court, mother is proud of Lula Ann's courageous act and even buys her small gold earrings. The poor child missed his mother's attention so much, and now, after the trial, Lula Ann gets a little praise. But her action is bad, and nothing can justify it, and she understands it when she becomes an adult, so she tries to rectify everything. Thus, the child, who in fiction, as a rule, embodied purity and innocence, acquires new – by no means angelic – traits. According to W. Muyumba "narratives of American childhood innocence are mythologies" (Muyumba, 2015).

Bride's story about her involvement in the conviction of the innocent teacher for child molestation for twenty-five years, in compositional terms, seems to be pushed deeper into the novel's narrative. Its second compositional feature is the fragmentation of the material supply, that creates the effect of some retardation of this compositional element. Each new fragment of Bride's revelations marks not only a higher degree

of openness to the reader, but also the existential despair of this girl, who seeks to make amends for Sophia Huxley, who was convicted because of her testimony. Fifteen years later, Bride decides to somehow justify herself and meets Sophia from prison with a desire to give her some gift, but the former prisoner brutally beats her. Brooke, Bride's boyfriend, thinking that she justifies the criminal (his brother was raped and killed by a maniac), leaves her. The girl cannot tell the truth even to her close friend Brooklyn, and only at the end of the novel Bride confesses to her perjury in court.

Perhaps Lula Ann is being pushed to commit perjury against the teacher who is said to be sexually abusing juveniles, one incident that happened the day before. One day she looks out the window and sees a terrible picture of a man's violence against a little boy, and the worst thing is that it is Mr. Leigh, the owner of their apartment. Therefore, when Lula Ann tells her mother about this incident, Sweetness becomes furious and forces her daughter to remain silent so as not to lose their shelter: "So when I told Sweetness what I'd seen, she was furious. Not about a little crying boy, but about spreading the story. She wasn't interested in tiny fists or big hairy thighs; she was interested in keeping our apartment. She said, "Don't you say a word about it. Not to anybody, you hear me, Lula? Forget it. Not a single word"" (Morrison, 2015). And, since mother and daughter remain silent, the rapist escapes a punishment. This is how the girl sees the hypocrisy of Sweetness, who believes that if it is profitable, then she can remain silent about the crime. Bride tells her boyfriend Booker about this incident, and he comforts her: she is not guilty of anything and cannot be responsible for the atrocities of other people. But he does not understand all the emotions of the girl, who feels guilty before this boy, and even more so before Sofia, and she is afraid to

confess it to anyone. Thus, the feeling of guilt does not allow Bride to live peacefully and develop further.

Another main image of the child, which is created using the technique of retrospection, is Booker Starbern, Bride's boyfriend, who seems well-read and interesting to her.

Booker grows up in a large, poor family where they can't even think about buying a television. But every member of this family reads and listens to vinyl records a lot. The boy loves listening to jazz, especially Louis Armstrong. His worldview is shaped by "talk in the flesh and text on paper": "Every Saturday morning, first thing before breakfast, his parents held conferences with their children requiring them to answer two questions put to each of them: 1. What have you learned that is true (and how do you know)? 2. What problem do you have?" (Morrison, 2015). Parents help children develop critical thinking and realize that they need to help each other in difficult situations: "Questions about personal problems prompted solutions from anyone at the table, and after they were solved or left pending, the children were sent to bathe and dress – the older ones helping the younger. Booker loved those Saturday morning conferences rewarded by the highlight of the weekend – his mother's huge breakfast feasts" (Morrison, 2015). Thus, Booker grows up in a close-knit and loving family, unlike Lula Ann. But a moment comes when everything in Booker's mind collapses, and he does not understand his parents, and he also has the idea of running away from his home as quickly as possible. This is due to the murder of his older brother Adam.

When Booker is three, his parents reveal that he had a twin brother who died at birth. The boy feels it all the time, it seems to him that the invisible creature is his close friend, he mentally communicates with him, but as he grows up, this entity becomes less tangible, and its place is taken by his brother Adam, who is only two years older. They understand each other

perfectly, go to school and walk together. And then in early September, Adam skateboards and disappears, and later he is found dead in a sewer pipe. This is a terrible blow for the whole family, especially for Booker: “Adam was more than brother to Booker, more than the “A” of parents who’d named their children alphabetically. He was the one who knew what Booker was thinking, feeling, whose humor was both raucous and instructive but never cruel, the smartest one who loved each of his siblings but especially Booker” (Morrison, 2015). So Booker loses another brother and a close friend. With the disappearance of Adam, mourning sets in the family: there are no more family conferences and hearty Saturday breakfasts, the father does not play his favorite records and does not listen to jazz. Silence envelops the house: “During those months quiet ticked through the house like a time bomb that would often explode into quarrels, silly and pointlessly mean” (Morrison, 2015). A terrible blow for Booker was also the fact that six years later, when he turns fourteen, he learns that the maniac who killed his brother and other boys is his music teacher, whom he considered the best person: “The nicest man in the world was an easygoing, retired auto mechanic who solicited home repairs” (Morrison, 2015). The maniac used his small white terrier named Boy as a bait. One witness recalls seeing a boy laughing joyfully and hugging a dog, and later recognizes him from photographs of the missing child posted everywhere. Police reveal horrific details of this maniac’s crimes: “Apparently the children were kept bound while molested, tortured and there were amputations”, “When Mr. Humboldt’s house was searched a dirty mattress sporting dried blood was found in the basement along with an elaborately decorated candy tin that held carefully wrapped pieces of dry flesh, which, on not very close inspection, turned out to be small penises” (Morrison, 2015). The people are outraged and demand reprisals against the maniac. Booker joins

the outraged people, but he does not want execution, he wants the criminal to suffer from endless pain and despair. Thus, he receives two blows: the death of his favorite brother and the loss of faith in people: the best teacher turns out to be a murderer.

After Adam's funeral, life in the Starbarn family returns to its previous routine: jazz compositions are heard from the record player again, Saturday family conferences with breakfast-feasts resume: "In time the whole family perked up like Sesame Street puppets, hoping that cheer, if worked at hard enough, could sugar the living and quiet the dead" (Morrison, 2015). But the problems discussed seem to Booker far-fetched and even offensive, and the jokes seem forced. It seems unfair to him to forget Adam so quickly. The only person who understands him is aunt Queen, who came from distant California for the funeral: "She alone sensed her nephew's anger-mixed sorrow", "She comforted him, strengthened him and validated the unfairness of the censure he was feeling from his family" (Morrison, 2015). She advises Booker not to let go of his deceased brother until he gives a sign, and thereby, without realizing it, pushes him into involuntary suffering because of the memory of his dead brother. When aunt Queen meets Bride, telling her about this episode of her life, she regrets her words: "I didn't count on what he took away from what I said. Anyhow, Adam's death became his own life. I think it's his only life" (Morrison, 2015).

Booker never fully recovers from this tragedy. A feeling of despair haunts him both during his student years and when he enters graduate school. He returns home and sees that Adam's room has been transformed and his sister Carol is living in it, and he is overcome with rage: first he quarrels with his sister, and then with his father, who demands that his son behave decently or get out of the house. Even before this quarrel, Booker suggests his father to create "some sort of memorial for Adam – a modest scholarship in his name, for example" (Morrison,

2015). But the father is convinced that they cannot just squander the money. Booker believes the family is betraying the memory of his dead brother. So, this child lives in a friendly and loving family, but after the tragedy he cannot return to his former life, like other members of his family, and as a sign of protest he has the idea of leaving his father's house quickly.

The theme of childhood is supplemented by a secondary child image of Bride's friend, Brooklyn, who is also presented through retrospection. They work together in a cosmetics company. Bride considers her the best friend and colleague: "She is a true friend and doesn't annoy me like those fake ones who come here just to gaze and pity me" (Morrison, 2015). At first glance, it seems so: after all, Brooklyn helps Bride get to the hospital after Sophia brutally beat her. But in reality, this is not a real friendship: Brooklyn tries to seduce Bride's boyfriend, she wants to take her place in the company, and after making sure that Bride quits her job to find her boyfriend, she considers her weak. But Brooklyn began to be friends with her because she believed that Bride was a very strong person and she had achieved everything in life, and Brooklyn compared herself with her and thought that they were the same. Brooklyn remembers her childhood: her mother is drunk all the time, her uncle pesters her, she runs away and screams for her mother to wake up from her drunken stupor and intervene. She had to run away from home at the age of fourteen. And everything that Brooklyn has achieved is only her merit: "I started out sweeping a hairdresser's shop then waitressing until I got the drugstore job. Long before Sylvia, Inc., I fought like the devil for each job I ever got and let nothing, nothing stops me" (Morrison, 2015).

Thus, Brooklyn's childhood cannot be called happy; it is associated with a dysfunctional family, with her mother's dislike, and her uncle's sexual harassment. However, she

achieves a good job independently and she does everything not to lose it.

Another interesting child image, that is also presented using the technique of retrospection, is little Sophia Huxley. She grows up in a religious family: “The family Bible was placed on a stand right next to the piano, where my mother played hymns after supper” (Morrison, 2015). Her parents forbid her to read anything except the Bible and religious treatises. They demand from her unquestioning obedience and submission. More than once, Sofia’s mother punishes her for some misdeed and puts her in a corner for several hours. The girl does not even understand what bad she has done: “I stood there, sometimes for two hours; a quiet scolding, a punishment for something I don’t remember now or even then. I wet my underwear? I played “wrestle” with a neighbor’s son?” (Morrison, 2015). Therefore, since childhood, Sofia has been dreaming of getting out of the house as quickly as possible. However, upon leaving prison, she realizes the correctness of her mother’s upbringing and, having learned about her mother’s death, mentally asks her for forgiveness: “I have to admit, though, that Mommy’s rules, her strict discipline helped me survive in Decagon” (Morrison, 2015).

The only child character whose past is presented in the novel only from the words of the character herself is the girl Rain. She calls her adoptive parents to help Bride, who did not fit into a sharp turn and crashed into a tree. When Bride does not wait for help, she suddenly sees in front of her a girl with amazing eye color: “A girl, very young, carrying a black kitten, stared at her with the greenest eyes Bride had ever seen” (Morrison, 2015). The girl calls a man who helps Bride get out of the car and brings her in his arms to his house. The man and the woman, Steve and Evelyn, turn out to be the girl’s adoptive parents: when she was about six years old, they found her in the

pouring rain, so they named her Rain. When strangers want to take her with them, she resists, even swears, but Steve and Evelyn still bring her to their home to wash, dry and feed. While walking with Bride, Rain reveals that she was stolen because she did not ask to be taken and remembers how she was found on the street. Her own mother sold her to men, and once, because she bit one client, her mother threw her out into the street. Rain confesses to Bride that if she met her mother, she would cut off her head: “How it would look – her eyes, her mouth, the blood shooting out of her neck. Made me feel good just thinking about it” (Morrison, 2015). Bride, who has herself been deprived of mother’s love, is horrified that mother could do this to her own daughter. The girl has such a terrible wound in her heart that out of hatred she draws terrible pictures of her mother’s death. The images of a doe with a small fawn, that appear just when Rain talks about it, are very revealing: “Neither saw the doe and her fawn standing among the trees on the other side of the road. The doe watching the pair of humans was as still as the tree she stood next to. The fawn nestled her flank” (Morrison, 2015). Even animals have a developed maternal instinct to protect their young. Bride becomes terrified from the realization of what atrocities mothers are capable of towards their own children. Rain talks about her homeless life, how she begged, how prostitutes protected her, and one woman even gave her clothes and food. Listening to the girl, Bride feels kindred feeling, because she was also deprived of a normal childhood: “Listening to this tough little girl who wasted no time on self-pity, she felt a companionship that was surprisingly free of envy. Like the closeness of schoolgirls” (Morrison, 2015). Rain considers that although Evelyn and Steve treat her well, they are not a real family: “We’re a fake family – okay but fake” (Morrison, 2015). Her adoptive parents’ frown when she talks about her old life; they do not even suspect that she cannot read. The girl could

only tell her cat about everything. Now Rain tells Bride about it, who listens to her attentively. The girl admits that she wants to have such a sister. What strikes Rain the most is Bride's courageous act. When a neighbor's boy aims a gun at the girl, Bride covers Rain with her body: "My black lady saw him and threw her arm in front of my face. The birdshot messed up her hand and arm. We fell, both of us, her on top of me", "My heart was beating fast because nobody had done that before. I mean Steve and Evelyn took me in and all but nobody put their own self in danger to save me. Save my life. But that's what my black lady did without even thinking about it" (Morrison, 2015). This creates another childish image, deprived of maternal love and family. Perhaps the good attitude of her adoptive parents and a meeting with Bride, to whom she pours out her soul, will help the girl cope with childhood traumas. However, now she still has an open wound in her heart, since she still feels hatred towards her mother, and the girl is not ready to forgive her yet.

We cannot agree with the conclusions of W. Muyumba that all three minor children's images do not reflect the formation of characters: "In God Help the Child, that means the individual voices, like Brooklyn's, Rain's, and Sofia's, don't do the work of establishing character, whether theirs or others. Those voices are present to add dissonant timbre to Bride's narration and Morrison's themes" (Muyumba, 2015). Children's images of Brooklyn and Sophie are shown in development. Unfavorable relationships with mothers and the hardships of childhood leave an imprint on later life and influence the formation of girls' character. Brooklyn runs away from home as a teenager, but she already understands that she must rely only on her own strength, so the girl undertakes any job: "Long before Sylvia, Inc., I fought like the devil for each job I ever got and let nothing, nothing stops me" (Morrison, 2015). Sofia's punishments from her parents, the fact that they forced her to be

submissive and obedient, subsequently help her survive in the disastrous prison atmosphere. These minor children's images make the childhood tragedy in some American families even more voluminous.

The child's concept absorbs all the signs of childhood, the entire "childish" spectrum and transfers them into the world of adults. So, Bride, who is twenty-three years old, slowly turns into a child after Booker's leaving. There are elements of mysticism or magical realism here. First, she notices that her pubic hair has disappeared: "It was when I got dressed for the drive I noticed the first peculiar thing. Every bit of my pubic hair was gone" (Morrison, 2015). She thinks she has an allergy or skin disease and decides to see a dermatologist within the next week. Then she notices that her earlobes are becoming smooth, "smooth as a baby's thumb", "earlobes as chaste as the day I was born" (Morrison, 2015). Bride does not understand what is happening to her; she thinks she is going mad. The girl connects her transformation into a child with Booker's departure, and she goes in search of him: "He was part of the pain – not a savior at all, and now her life was in shambles because of him" (Morrison, 2015). Using a found receipt from a music store, she gets out of pawn Booker's trumpet and learns that he can be found in a small town of Whiskey. She goes by car there. Bride does not understand why the young man to whom she poured out her heart left her: "Too weak, too scared to defy Sweetness, or the landlord, or Sofia Huxley, there was nothing in the world left to do but stand up for herself finally and confront the first man she had bared her soul to, unaware that he was mocking her" (Morrison, 2015). After the accident, Bride recovers at Steve and Evelyn's house. The young woman herself feels that she acts like a child: "she was ashamed – crying every minute, petulant, childish and unwilling to help herself or accept aid gracefully from others", "Bride's envy watching them was infantile but she

couldn't stop herself" (Morrison, 2015). The transformations in the body continue. Bride notices that her lush breasts are disappearing: "she discovered that her chest was flat. Completely flat, with only the nipples to prove it was not her back" (Morrison, 2015). She cannot get rid of the suspicion that she is turning into a child: "she would have run, rocketed away from the scary suspicion that she was changing back into a little black girl", "she tried and failed to forget what she believed was her crazed transformation back into a scared little black girl" (Morrison, 2015). Bride understands that all these transformations are happening because of Booker, and remembers that he once said that what can be corrected must be corrected. She wants to meet and explain him everything, understanding on a subconscious level that she is not ready to lose him forever. Bride finds Booker's aunt, who tells her about Booker's childhood, about the death of his brother. And the girl begins to understand the young man. Finally, Bride finds out where Booker lives, but he does not want to see her. The young man thinks that she bought gifts for the teacher who seduced children, but Bride confesses to lying and that she wanted to somehow compensate for her guilt with the gifts. The girl explains her action to him: she was simply trying to make her mother take her hand at least once in her life. Not immediately, but they understand each other. The next morning, waking up, Bride realizes that by telling her beloved young man the whole truth, she relieves her mind: "Having confessed Lula Ann's sins she felt newly born. No longer forced to relive, no, outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father" (Morrison, 2015). Aunt Queen, who was injured in the fire, helped them become even closer, as they care for her day and night. At this time, Bride notices that her magnificent breasts are returning to her, and holes appear in her ears. Perhaps Bride was turning into a child to get a second chance – to correct what she

could. At the end of the novel, she finds herself pregnant and breaks the news to Booker. And the young man does not want to lose her, he gives her “the hand of trust and caring for – a combination that some call natural love” (Morrison, 2015). They think that their child will live in love and care: “A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath” (Morrison, 2015). Sweetness, having learned that she will soon become a grandmother, both rejoices and warns her daughter that it is not easy to be a real mother, but, nevertheless, wishes her good luck: “Good luck and God help the child” (Morrison, 2015). Thus, the novel ends optimistically: there is hope for the future – perhaps a bright one.

In general, the theme of childhood, growing up and personality formation in T. Morrison’s *God Help the Child* is carried out as follows. The novel introduces a variety of childhood characters dealing with deprivation of love and misunderstanding in childhood: Lula Ann (growing up without her mother’s love), Rain (her mother sells her to men), Sophia (her parents punish her and force her to be submissive, breaking a personality), Brooklyn (a drunken mother does not care about her daughter and the fact that the girl’s uncle is molesting the child), Booker (the death of his brother does not allow him to reconcile with his parents, who are trying to live a normal life after the death of their eldest son). Every teenager has a reason to leave their home. The general tragedy lies in the irresponsibility of parents, who intentionally or unknowingly deprive their children of love and affection and thereby doom them to an unhappy adult life (the inability to properly build relationships with people of the opposite sex and start a family). It would seem that such injustice of fate should form a closed, selfish and cruel personality. However, Lula Ann, for example, cannot be classified as an evil child. Of course, the lack of

maternal love cannot but affect the girl, and her terrible act (she slanders the teacher, accusing her of molesting children) is explained only by Lula Ann's desire to somehow attract attention to herself and receive a drop of love from her mother. But the feeling of guilt does not allow the adult Bride to live quietly and build a serious relationship with a man. The attempt to correct the mistake (to give gifts to Sofia) does not work. Only Bride's transformation into a child during the search for Booker gives her a chance to rethink everything and somehow rectify the situation (she covers Rain from a bullet with her body and she takes care of the dying aunt Queen). Toni Morrison uses this element of magical realism, the return to childhood, as the way of self-knowledge for the main character. At the end of the novel, Bride learns of her pregnancy, and she is initially afraid of the baby's future, but receives support from Booker. Thus, she gets the opportunity to give the child all her love and tenderness and correct the original fatal injustice. Booker is helped to let go of his past by his aunt Queen and Bride. Children's images of Brooklyn and Sophie are shown in development. Unfavorable relationships with mothers and the hardships of childhood leave an imprint in later life and influence the formation of girls' character. The obedience and humility that the mother demanded from little Sophia seem excessive, but they later help the young woman to withstand the terrible hardships of prison. Brooklyn becomes stronger from troubles experienced at an early age and since childhood she understands that she must rely only on herself.

### **Conclusions**

So, the article analyzes the theme of childhood as the way of gaining experience, which makes it possible to form

character. The main idea of the novel is revealed through the main and secondary images of children from different families

and with different principles of upbringing, through archetypal allusions, and the fragmentation and multifacetedness of the composition, and even through the name chosen by the protagonist. In the novel, different time layers coexist, the present and past of the main and secondary characters are closely intertwined, since it is in the past that the future is formed. Almost all children's images (except for Rain) are presented in retrospection, so the reader understands the influence of childhood trauma on the formation of personality. The tragedy of the protagonist is that she was born "too black" for the society in which she lives: because of the color of her skin, she is deprived of her parents' love and despised by her classmates. The color of one's skin is an objective fact that determines the specifics of the psychology of the African American child, which does not depend on the literature heroine herself and which she cannot correct.

Thus, in the novel, the theme of childhood is presented as the way of gaining existential experience, which makes it possible to form character and make one's own choices in life. However, not all life's difficulties can be overcome by realizing one's path. But, despite all vicissitudes of fate, childhood traumas and misfortunes, the protagonist of the novel overcomes her inner fear of the past, realizes her guilt and thus becomes a strong and formed personality. The character gets "a second chance" to define her life path precisely due to the author's use of the element of magical realism.

The motif of growing up is presented in the context of a socio-philosophical approach. The personality is considered as a system of socially significant traits associated with a certain social community that becomes more stable the older a person gets. It is shown that the problematic manifestation of individual's social behavior is caused by the fact that its sociocultural transformation takes place in conditions of serious

personal and social contradictions and obstacles of the objective and subjective nature.

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