The Crypted Self and Melancholia in
Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*

Suhyun Kim

I. Loss, Mourning, and Melancholia

Toni Morrison is known for her unique narratives that capture and represent the otherwise undocumented individual experiences of African American people—experiences that are unspeakable and thus kept untold.¹) Delving into what lies behind the unspeakable memories of African American characters in Morrison’s novels, many scholars have examined psychological as well as bodily wounds resulting from slavery and/or racism. For instance, Morrison’s most well-known novel *Beloved* (1987), which probes into what underlies an apparently

¹) Morrison was the first African American writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1993), being appraised as a writer “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” (“The Nobel”).
scandalous story of an infanticide by the slave mother, provides a rich source of studies on the trauma of slavery even after its abolition. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) depicts the painful racial shame that is internalized in and transmitted through African American families, with an “ugly” black girl who yearns for blue eyes at the center of the story. Considering the portrayals of racial conflicts and racism in the author’s previous novels, the American society depicted in Morrison’s latest novel *God Help the Child* (2015), set for the first time in contemporary America among her novels, is freer from racial discrimination than ever before since the abolition of slavery. American citizens seem able to appreciate the beauty of blackness; “[b]lue blacks are all over TV, in fashion magazines, commercials, even starring in movies” (Morrison 176). Yet, despite the apparent openness to racial differences, and the freedom and equality allowed to all members of the society, Bride, the young, beautiful, and socially successful “midnight-black” (Morrison 3) female protagonist, feels miserable. I take the disquieting sense of sorrow in the protagonist as a point of departure for my analysis, employing the psychoanalytical notions of incorporation and melancholia. While melancholia issues from the loss of a beloved object that cannot be mourned and leaves the subject psychically wounded, this paper argues that Bride’s melancholia issues from the loss of her childhood self that had been left unmourned due to oppressive forces—racism and child abuse—that keep the process of mourning impossible.

Rejected by her mother Sweetness and regarded as an “enemy” by her father Louis soon after she is born because of her intimidatingly black skin, Bride tries to bid farewell to the unloved, abused Lula Ann, her childhood self, by refashioning herself into a “deep dark beauty” as soon as she leaves home (5, 57). However, even as she is capable of capitalizing on her blackness that had once deprived her of love and approval, the sense of sorrow lingers, culminating in mysterious