

**NEGATION IN *GOD HELP THE CHILD*: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF  
APOSIOPEISIS AND EPANALEPSIS**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines Freud's (1925) concept of negation in relation to the language and characters in Morrison's (2016) novel God Help the Child. In negation, the repressed is acknowledged and that allows for the creation of ideational content. Ideational content can be Repression of a memory allows for a return back to an original place of pleasure. This paper will focus on the intellectual functions of judgment. The first is to determine whether a thing possesses a property that is good or bad. If the property is good, the thing is a source of pleasure and will be introjected into the self. If bad, the thing is a source of un-pleasure and will be expelled from the self. The second function of judgment is reality-testing, where a mental image must be discovered in perception (reality) over and over. Analysis of this process is conducted through the language used in the novel narrated by Sweetness, and the literary devices embedded within. The language and use of aposiopesis and epanalepsis construct the character as ambivalent and unreliable.*

**Key Words:** negation; repression; reality-testing; ambivalence; psychoanalysis

In this paper, I intend to explore Freud's (1925) concept of negation through Morrison's character Sweetness, in the novel *God Help the Child*. The beginning section (3 – 7) and the final section (176 – 178) of the novel, both narrated by Sweetness, will be the focus of my analysis.

Morrison's use of aposiopesis in the final section of her novel *God Help the Child*, narrated by Sweetness, indicates negation. Aposiopesis is a literary device:

derived from a Greek word that means 'becoming silent' wherein a sentence is intentionally broken off or left unfinished in order to give an impression of unwillingness or inability to continue... '[a] conscious anacoluthon...'... leaving the reader in a position of guessing what stands behind this sudden silence... 'signifies such emotional states as shame, fear or anger'. (Churchill 203-204)

The intentional pause created through the use of aposiopesis creates ambiguity and room for interpretation. Written in first-person, Sweetness says: "True. I was really upset even repelled by her black skin when she was born and at first I thought of. . . No. I have to push those

memories away – fast. No point. I know I did the best for her under the circumstances” (177). The use of ellipses interrupts the thought and is followed by the word ‘no’ - a stark contrast to Sweetness’s first word, ‘true’. I interpret the word ‘true’ in relation to its root in the Greek word ἀλήθεια (aletheia) which signifies an un-concealment.

Sweetness begins the narrative with the word ‘true’ (Morrison 177) as though to confirm her acknowledgment of her own guilt and deficiency as a mother because of her disapproval of her daughter at birth. Then, she begins to reveal what would be considered as an unconventional thought - the disapproval of her daughter – but, intentionally silences herself. The word ‘no’ (177) follows the silence and marks her negation and further repression of the memory. Here, ‘no’ is not only an interruption to what Sweetness was going to say but a rejection to the thought itself.

Laplanche and Pontalis (1980) define negation as a: “procedure whereby the subject, while formulating one of his wishes, thoughts or feelings which has been repressed hitherto, contrives, by disowning it, to continue to defend himself against it” (261). Further, Freud (1925) describes negation as a “way of acknowledging the repressed, indeed it amounts to a lifting of the repression, although not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed” (96-97). The act of lifting is synonymous with bringing the unconscious into the conscious. Common in both definitions is the notion of repression – defined by Laplanche and Pontalis (1980) as:

an operation whereby the subject attempts to repel, or to confine to the unconscious, representations (thoughts, images, memories) which are bound up to an instinct. Repression occurs when to satisfy an instinct – though likely to be pleasurable in itself – would incur the risk of provoking unpleasure because of other requirements. (390)

According to Freud (1925), through negation: “ideational content not being allowed into consciousness – is undone” (97), resulting in a “kind of intellectual recognition of the repressed” (97). The repressed memories however, cannot be recognized or negated, until they are recalled:

Freud found that his patients did not have certain memories at their disposition, although these were perfectly vivid once they *had* been recalled: ‘...it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget, and therefore intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and suppressed.’” (Laplanche & Pontalis 392)

Sweetness is consciously aware of her repressed memories of Bride and, as indicated by the word ‘no’, negates the consequences and even ownership of those memories. Sweetness recalls her memory of motherhood because she receives a “note on blue paper...from Lula Ann” (Morrison 176), announcing her pregnancy. The recognition of the memory allows for the creation of ideational content which Sweetness negates. The language that follows the silence is abrupt and chaotic; Sweetness appears to enter into an emotional state of anger and fear (Churchill 203-204).

I would like to suggest that the unmentionable thought Sweetness almost discloses here, has already been shared in the very first section of the novel:

I know I went crazy for a minute because once – just for a few seconds – I held a blanket over her face and pressed. But I couldn't do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color. I even thought of giving her away to an orphanage someplace. And I was scared to be one of those mothers who put their babies on church steps. All I know is that for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking at my teat. I went to bottle feeding soon as I got home. (Morrison 5)

Sweetness confesses to considering and then acting upon a desire to terminate her daughter's life; however, she does not "do that" (5). In this moment, Sweetness's fantasy of her as a mother who unconditionally loves her daughter, disintegrates. She negates these honest memories and denies responsibility for her ill thought and mothering in relation to her newborn daughter because of the "circumstances" (177) – Bride was born with "blue-black" (5) skin. She contemplates "giving her away" (5), but does not for fear of how the act would taint her reputation in society. Her negation is a form of defence: "I know I did the best for her under the circumstances" (177). Sweetness is defending herself against the ideas that sprouted in thinking about the repressed instinct to kill her daughter because doing so would provoke un-pleasure due to "other requirements" (Laplanche & Pontalis 390). I interpret other requirements, in this scenario, to refer to societal norms and expectations of mothering in conjunction with laws against filicide. The societal norms and laws would in turn have a direct effect on Sweetness either resulting in being ostracized or jail time. Then, Sweetness describes her daughter using a derogatory term, "pickaninny" (Morrison 5), – referring "to children of Black African decent or a racial caricature thereof" (Dailey 10) – to explain how rather than breastfeeding her, she bottle-fed Bride. The language does not suggest Bride was having difficulty latching onto the breast and therefore had to be bottle fed, rather it suggests again that Sweetness feared how she would appear having such a black baby associated with her. Bride was a source of un-pleasure for Sweetness throughout her upbringing and is also one in memory. Through negation, Sweetness is making a judgment on her parenting of Bride.

The "task of the intellectual function of judgment [is] to affirm or negate the contents of thoughts" (Freud 97). Negation in judgment is "basically to say: 'This is something I'd rather repress'" (97), and the substitute for repression is disapproval (97). In disapproval, "thought frees itself from the restrictions imposed by repression and appropriates material without which [intellectual judgment] could perform its function" (97). Sweetness disapproves of the memories she holds of becoming a mother to, and raising Bride. I interpret the disapproval as a license for Sweetness to think openly about the memory and appropriate other materials (perhaps in the form of facts or purporting other's opinions), used to then justify her negation of the same memory.

Freud defines judgment as: “governed by the pleasure principle, [and] incorporating it into or expelling it from the ego” (99). The function of intellectual judgment is to “decide whether or not a thing possess a certain property and whether or not an imaged thing exists in reality” (97). A thing’s property can be either good in which “primal pleasure-ego wants to introject [it] into itself” (97), or bad, in which the “primal pleasure-ego wants to... expel [it] from itself” (97). Sweetness then wants to expel the memories she represses, represented through the use of aposiopesis, because they are bad and most importantly, not pleasurable. She is utilizing the process of disapproval to manipulate herself into thinking that her memory is on the *inside* (98): “non-real, merely imagined, subjective” (98). Her disapproval enables her to reconsider her memory as a subjective interpretation – rather than objective– and thereby not real.

Reality-testing deciphers “whether something already present in the ego, as a mental image, can also be rediscovered in perception<sup>7</sup> (reality)...to ascertain that it still exists” (98). In *rediscovery* however, “The reproduction of a perception as a mental image is not always a faithful copy; it can be modified by omissions or by the fusion of various elements. Here the job of reality-testing is to assess the extent of these distortions” (98). I will contrast Sweetness’s reproductions of her perceptions before and after negation.

Sweetness’s negation leads her to fantasize of a loving mother-daughter relationship between herself and Bride, that provided the foundation for a Bride to grow into a successful member of society: “Yes, I was tough on her. You bet I was. After she got all that attention following the trial of those teachers, she became hard to handle...Still, some of my schooling must have rubbed off. See how she turned out? A rich career girl. Can you beat it?” (Morrison 178). According to Freud’s (1925) explanation of perception: “the mere existence of the idea of a thing is a guarantee that the thing actually exists” (98), suggests that Sweetness is able to conjure this thought because the thing already exists in objective reality – Bride is a successful member of society. Through reality-testing then, Sweetness is able to re-find the image or idea of Bride held in her thoughts – a return to pleasure. This, being the first function of intellectual judgment, would then be introjected into Sweetness’s self, even though it is an “unfaithful copy” (98). Whereas prior to the use of aposiopesis, Sweetness says: “If I sound irritable, ungrateful, part of it is because underneath is regret. All the little things I didn’t do or did wrong” (Morrison 177). Sweetness seems to be able to recall reality without distortion because she is able to see her own follies; however, I wonder if the distortion of a reproduction of perception can result in a more negative rendition of events. I will explore this inquiry through Sweetness’s language – her use of animal imagery – which, I argue, connects her to Mr. Leigh.

Sweetness uses animal imagery to describe Mr. Leigh, the landlord who raped the whimpering nameless boy (55), and herself. Mr. Leigh as “the dog” (177) alludes to the way in which Bride witnessed him defile the young boy during the night in the “walled area that led to the building’s basement” (55). Bride did report the incident to her mother but,

according to Bride, Sweetness “was only interested in keeping our apartment” (55): “ ‘Don’t you say a word about it. Not to anybody, you hear me, Lula? Forget it. Not a single word.’ “(55-56). Sweetness explains: “Back in the nineties when Lula Ann was born, the law was against discriminating in who you could rent to, but not many landlords paid attention to it. They made up reasons to keep you out. But I got lucky with Mr. Leigh. I know he upped the rent seven dollars from what he advertised...” (6). In remembering and sharing this event with Booker, Bride rationalized with her mother’s thinking: “I know now what I didn’t know then – standing up to Mr. Leigh meant having to look for another apartment. And that it would be hard finding a location in another safe, meaning mixed, neighborhood” (55). Mr. Leigh was the white landlord and had the power to have Sweetness and Bride removed from their home and this rendered him faultless in the rape. The only witness of the rape could not challenge or report her white landlord to the police without direct negative ramifications.

Social hierarchy deemed Sweetness and Bride, black females, subordinate to Mr. Leigh, a white male, even though the law stipulated equality in renting property. Sweetness, aware of her social standing, does not confront Mr. Leigh nor does she report the incident to the police in fear of how he may retaliate against her. Mr. Leigh seems to be aware of this power and thereby feels justified in his insolent remark towards Bride when he noticed her watching him rape the boy from her apartment building above: “ ‘Hey, little nigger cunt! Close that window and get the fuck outta here!’ ” (56). The phrase ‘the dog’ then references a powerful abuser that successfully conceals their (even publicly known) transgressive acts because of their capacity to manipulate their position of authority to be vindictive.

Further, the phrase echoes WM. V. Humboldt, the man convicted of “the sexually stimulated slaughter of six boys” (118), one of which was Booker’s brother Adam. Mr. Humboldt used a “cute little dog ... he called ‘Boy’ ... [a] white terrier as a lure” (119). Mr. Humboldt, described as “the nicest man in the world” (118), kept the children “bound while molested, tortured and there were amputations” (19). Mr. Humboldt was knowingly trusted and not perceived as a threat thereby allowing him to continue his spree. Like Mr. Leigh, he was an abuser that used the power of a ‘nice man’s’ guise and a little white dog, to successfully molest and murder six boys.

Sweetness says that she is “sixty-three – too young for pasture” (176). Though a common colloquialism for aging entities sent to live the remainder of their lives in an idyllic setting as they await death, the choice of language seems to connect Sweetness and Mr. Leigh. Though not a “dog” (177), Sweetness is an animal and guilty for all things she did and did not do as a mother (177); however, at the same time, she feels as though Bride is punishing her “for doing the well-intended and, in fact, necessary way” (177) to raise Bride.

Her emotions are erratic and her tone is charged by her admitted regret (177). She opines to be hated (177) by her daughter who, sends her money as “a way to stay away and quiet down the little bit of conscience she’s got left” (177), yet she is angry because Bride left her alone “as soon as she could” (177). Further, she sarcastically congratulates Bride on her

pregnancy: “Good move, Lula Ann...you’re in for a big shock. Big. You and your nameless boyfriend, husband, pickup – whoever – imagine OOOH! A baby! Kitchee kitchee koo!” (178). Followed by genuine advice: “Listen to me. You are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works and how it changes when you are a parent. Good luck and God help the child” (178). I interpret this as ambivalence, defined by Laplanche and Pontalis (1980) as:

The simultaneous existence of contradictory tendencies, attitudes or feelings in the relationship to a single object...first, ambivalence of the will (*Ambitendenz*), as when the subject wants to eat and not eat at the same time; secondly, intellectual ambivalence, involving simultaneous adherence to contradictory propositions; and lastly, affective ambivalence, in which a single impulse contains both love and hate for the same person. (26)

Sweetness’s ambivalence of will is displayed through her desire to have a relationship with her daughter and her indifference in not having a relationship with her. She enjoys receiving money from Bride but accuses her of sending the money only to appease her conscience and meet society’s expectations of maintaining a relationship with your mother. Sweetness also refuses to make an effort to create a relationship with her daughter. Moreover, Sweetness’s intellectual ambivalence is demonstrated through her belief in the importance of shadeism. She explains the importance of grouping “according to skin colour” (Morrison 4) and the embarrassment of being high yellow but having a blue-black baby (4) but then claims to be colour blind: “I forgot about her colour” (177). In addition, Sweetness presents adherence to contradictory notions of what constitutes a family. Her language indicates her indifference to Bride potentially having a child out of wedlock: “You and your nameless boyfriend, husband, pickup – whoever” (178). This is contrasted with her anger for her own husband leaving her and their child and by the fear she has that Bride’s partner may also leave: “I wonder if he is as black as she is. If so, she needn’t worry like I did...Blue blacks are all over the TV, fashion magazines, commercials, even starring in movies” (176). I interpret the acknowledgement of the acceptance and representation of “blue blacks” in the media as Sweetness comforting herself rather than comfort for Bride. Finally, Sweetness’s affective ambivalence is elucidated through her relationship with Bride. She continues thinking about her daughter and gives advice on motherhood which may be indicative of care and love. On the other hand, she hates Bride because she blames her for the loss of her husband Louis (6) and for the grave imposition she created in Sweetness’s life by being too-black. I also interpret her *hate* of Bride as an admission tangled in her guilt as a *bad* mother.

Moreover, Sweetness’s negation through repetition is elucidated through the use of the literary device, epanalepsis. Epanalepsis occurs within the final sentences of the very first section of the novel, narrated by Sweetness, and between the first and final sentences of section. Allieheedi and Di Marco (2014) define epanalepsis as: “The repetition at the end of a line, phrase, or clause of a word or words that occurred at the beginning of the same line,

phrase, or clause” (4). Unlike aposiopesis, epanalepsis creates redundancy and draws attention to the word or phrase being repeated.

Written in first-person, Sweetness’s voice is used to explain the birth of her daughter Lula Ann and her experience as a new single-parent. Unlike Sweetness, and her biological father Louis, who were “high yellow” (3), Lula Ann was “Midnight black, Sudanese black...[like] Tar...[with] too-thick lips...[and] witchy [eyes]” (3-6). Sweetness describes her child’s appearance as embarrassing (4) and the cause of her separation with her husband (6). After attempting to murder Bride (5), Sweetness decided to change the outwardly appearance of their relationship: “I told her to call me ‘Sweetness’ instead of ‘Mother’ or ‘Mama’ It was safer. Being that black and having what I think are too-thick lips calling me ‘Mama’ would confuse people” (6). Sweetness would not allow her daughter to publically acknowledge her as her mother and she would not, in return, publically acknowledge Bride as her daughter. The opinions of others concerned Sweetness: “they looked and Lula Ann and back at me – like I was cheating or something...I still had to be careful. Very careful in how I raised her. I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to keep her head down and not to make trouble” (7). This is then followed by a repetitive phrase: “But it’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. It’s not” (7). Interestingly, this is the same phrase the book begins with: “It’s not my fault. So you can’t blame me” (3). Sweetness is convincing herself that she cannot be blamed for her treatment of her daughter. The repetition of this phrase emphasizes Sweetness’s negation for her mothering – is she acknowledging that there is something wrong or bad that occurred but denies that she is to blame.

Sweetness recalls the memory of her birthing and raising Bride. She expresses her thoughts and feelings on having a too-black child but negates responsibility. Sweetness denies fault thereby using negation as a mode of defence. The negation lifts these memories from repression and enables Sweetness to think their past but, only from her perspective. Sweetness explains the imagined subjective reality she created and purported as objective. Her negation grants her the ability to consider this elaborately staged life as the only option – again, “It was safer” (6). Further, she refuses to recognize Bride’s traumatic experience of these events. Sweetness wants to expel the memories she holds about motherhood and giving birth because they are not pleasurable. Her birthing a child that was not the same skin colour and her or her husband led him to believe she cheated on him: “I never did convince him that I ain’t never, ever fooled around with another man” (5). There is pain surrounding these memories for Sweetness because the experience catapulted her life into hardship and loneliness.

The second part of judgment in negation is reality-testing. As aforementioned, Sweetness’s negation leads her to imagine and implement a non-familial relationship between her and Bride. Sweetness being able to have this idea, according to Freud (1925), is a guarantee of its existence (98). Thus, Sweetness is able to re-discover the idea of a childless life. This would then be introjected into Sweetness’s self as an unfaithful, but pleasure

inducing, copy. I interpret the use of epanalepsis for negation, as a symbol for Sweetness's continuous search for pleasure.

Freud asserts the task of judgment is to lead "the way from thought to action" (98). With Freud as the guide for my thinking, I have put into action – through writing – my opinion of Sweetness and understanding of negation. My analysis of Sweetness through the use of aposiopesis and epanalepsis, has left me grappling with questions about the relationship between reality-testing and being: How does the interaction between reality-testing and being alter ourselves? How is this related to projection? Also, is repression ever fully successful insofar that it never becomes conscious? And if so, could we ever know?

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