

# An Ethical Study of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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**Abstract** Toni Morrison's latest novel *God Help the Child* presents the ethical dilemma of a young black woman who is traumatized by her childhood experiences and undergoes transformation before accomplishing maturity and wisdom. Morrison demonstrates her ethical choice by juxtaposing issues of race and materialism and apposes two modes of relationships between characters in the novel: "conditional relationships" represented by Sweetness, Louis and Booker, which leads to Bride's spiritual dilemma and physical regression; "unconditional care", embodied by Steve, Evelyn and Rain, which brings Bride out of her dilemma and leads to the recovery of her body and her humanity. The present article aims to elaborate on ethical dilemma, ethical choice and ethical theme of the novel in the light of the theory of ethical literary criticism, in which Morrison's plotting and characterization will be analyzed in the context of colorism and materialism, and the theme of "natural love", as a healthier and more lasting relationship bonding based on empathy and mutual care, will be revealed.

**Key words** Toni Morrison; *God Help the Child*; ethical dilemma; ethical choice; ethical theme

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As an initiation novel, *God Help the Child* (2015) traces a cyclic growth of a contemporary black woman, Bride (born Lula Ann Bridewell), whose interpersonal relationships and love life have been complicated by the prevailing colorism and materialism in the world she lives. Previous studies of this novel are primarily scattered among feminism, myth-archetype, narrative strategies, psychoanalysis and

other theories. They have brought to the fore classic Morrisonian themes of identity, racism, sexism, childhood trauma, religion, *etc.* Yet there has been a regrettable critical silence on the ethical import of the novel. Few critics have studied the theme of love from ethical perspective, and fewer have connected it with the issues of race and materialism.

Given that *God Help the Child* highlights core issues such as ethical dilemma, ethical choice and ethical theme, it would appear germane to an in-depth analysis of ethical literary criticism. As professor Nie Zhenzhao says, “Ethical criticism.....not only judges the moral value of historical literature from the standpoint of current morality, but also emphasizes the return to the ethical scene to interpret literature and to find out the objective ethical causes of literature and ethical factors that lead to social events and the fates of characters and to make a moral evaluation from the historical point of view” (Nie, “Ethical” 14). *God Help the Child* is just such a historical novel full of ethical issues worthy of a thorough analysis.

In this article, the protagonist Bride’s ethical dilemma will be discussed by juxtaposing her interpersonal relationships with her skin color and economic position in society. It argues that Bride’s personal life is filled with conditional relationships: unnatural racial grouping, abnormal familial bonding, and materialized interpersonal relationships. Moreover, Bride’s ethical choices from perjury to unconditional care will be analyzed by the change of her ethical context. Finally, Toni Morrison’s ethical theme of “natural love” will be fully disclosed.

### **Ethical Dilemma: Conditional Relationships**

Ethical dilemma refers to the contradictions and conflicts in literary texts that are difficult to resolve because of ethical confusion. It is exactly the reason that characters have different destinies and make various ethical choices. In *God Help the Child*, Bride’s ethical dilemma stems from the dual character of her skin color. Morrison maintains that “In *God Help the Child*, color is both a curse and a blessing, a hammer and a golden ring” (Morrison, “Color...” 51). The author’s comment explains the personal predicament that Bride finds herself in. In Bride’s childhood, skin color is a “curse” for her. Because of her blackness, she is facing contempt from the black community and emotional withholding from her mother; thus, she chooses to commit perjury to win some favor from the people around her. In her adulthood, skin color seems to be a “blessing” for her because she could capitalize it to her advantage in the commercial world. However, she is dehumanized by the materialization of her appearance, which alienates her relationships with Booker, Sweetness, Sofia and Brooklyn, accordingly.

As a curse, Bride's skin color puts her into the ethical dilemma of unnatural communal and familial relationships. It is mainly because of colorism within the black community. Colorism is a term popularized by Alice Walker to describe "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (Walker 290). It is a process of discrimination which light-skinned people of color of the same race show over their dark-skinned counterpart. In accepting the white value of skin privilege, the black community help create their ethical dilemma in which the black individual has become as oppressive as the white one. Thus, blacks of the younger generation are to be marginalized by their community and to become strangers at home, which is more dangerous than being oppressed by an external force.

In *God Help the Child*, unnatural communal bonding based on colorism is represented in the behavior of "passing for white" on the part of Bride's light-skinned relatives. As a constant motif in African American literature, "passing for white" refers to the behavior of some light-skinned blacks who pretend to be whites and identify themselves as such to the point of erasing their own identity as blacks, even breaking up family ties to group with the whites. Bride's great-grandmother "passed for white and never said another word to any one of her children" (Morrison, *God* 3). To light-skinned blacks like her, it is a way for them to "hold on to a little dignity" so that they will not have to suffer from racism as much as the blue-black fellowmen (Morrison, *God* 4). However, to the victims of colorism, the behavior of "passing for white" destroys their self-esteem and harms racial bonding.

Moreover, blacks' familial bonding also becomes conditional because of colorism, which means that it is based on the family members' ability to meet the norms of white supremacy. Unsurprisingly, in *God Help the Child*, skin privilege is an integral part of Bride's reality as an abused black girl in a nuclear family. Born a tar-black girl to high yellow parents, she is abandoned by her father Louis, who treats her as a stranger and an enemy; what is much worse, she is raised at an ashamed and bitter distance by her mother Sweetness, who "couldn't see past all that black to know who she was and just plain love her" (Morrison, *God* 43). Sweetness keeps on talking about how Bride's blackness "scares" her and white people. She refuses to let Bride call her "Mother" or "Mama" and withholds physical contact with her all the time. Sweetness's "conditional love" for Bride is sole because of Bride's lack of lighter skin.

Although Sweetness rationalizes that her careful and strict way of raising will tighten her daughter up against racism, her physical and emotional withholding harms Bride to a great extent. Bride's sense of self is deeply scarred by her parents,

resulting in the confusion of her ethical identity. Bearing Sweetness' teaching in mind, little Bride doesn't fight against her classmates who make fun of her at school: "So I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins, with no antibiotics available" (Morrison, *God* 57). She accepts racist treatment passively and "built up immunity so tough that not being a 'nigger girl' was all I needed to win" (Morrison, *God* 57). Therefore, deep down in Bride's mind she is always "a poor little black girl," the unwanted child of the family as well as the community.

Unnatural communal and familial bonding destroys Bride's humanity and leads to her childhood misdeed of testifying against an innocent person. At the age of six, Bride sees her mother's white landlord raping a white boy. She quickly learns that Sweetness is unwilling to compromise their living situation in a rental market hostile to black women. So, she obeys her mother's instruction blindly and keeps silent about the matter. Two years later, when the white woman teacher Sofia is accused of child molest, Bride becomes a false accuser and makes an ethical choice against Sofia. Deep down in her conscience, she wonders, "What if it was the landlord my forefinger was really pointing at in that courtroom? ..... Was I pointing at the idea of him? His nastiness or the curse he threw at me?" (Morrison, *God* 56) On the one hand, Bride's act serves as a compensation for her silence about the landlord's crime of child molest two years earlier. On the other hand, as a blue-black child who has never gotten any unconditional love from either the community or her family, Bride tells the terrible lie to win some attention from them. Indeed, she gets what she needs. More to her expectation, Sweetness even has her earlobes pierced and buys her a pair of golden earrings. It can be safely said that Bride gives in to the ethics of conditional relationships by selling her childhood innocence and honesty.

Even though Bride's skin color seems to become a blessing to her in adulthood, she is still confounded by the influence of conditional relationships. Her blackness is capitalized with the backdrop of prevailing cash nexus in a time of materialism and pop culture. As a twenty-something rising beauty in the materialistic society, Bride is advised by an industry friend to dress exclusively in white to emphasize her blackness: "Black sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilized world" (Morrison, *God* 36), and "black is the new black" (Morrison, *God* 33). Now Bride can harness the social and economic value of her blackness and convert it to a kind of "glory" (Morrison, *God* 57). "Glorious" as they may seem, the desiring gazes Bride's blackness attracts fail to affirm her empathetic humanity or bring her interpersonal intimacy. Rather, the more successful she is, the less she cares about people; what is worse, her interpersonal relationships with people surrounding her are mainly based

on material wealth and worldly success.

In Bride's experiences of romantic relationships, men and women are attracted to each other because of externals. Bride says that "Every girl I know introduces her boyfriend as a lawyer or artist or club owner or broker or whatever. The job, not the guy, is what the girlfriend adores" (Morrison, *God* 62). Likewise, all of Bride's boyfriends are typecast: "would-be actors, rappers, professional athletes", and Bride knows clearly that they are either "players waiting for my crotch or my paycheck like an allowance" or men who "already having made it, treating me like a medal, a shiny testimony to their prowess" (Morrison, *God* 36). In her mind, none of these boyfriends is "giving, helpful---none interested in what I thought, just what I looked like" (Morrison, *God* 37). There is no genuine care or love in their relationships.

Bride's romantic relationship with "her guy" Booker is no exception. Her love for Booker focuses on externals. She describes her relationship with Booker as ".....he is one gorgeous man. I'm not so bad myself" (Morrison, *God* 10). It can be seen that Bride's measure of romantic relationships is taken in terms of vanity. Bride's "knowing" of Booker also stops at the level of the skin. As the text repeatedly stresses, Bride's "lack of interest in his personal life" is complete (Morrison, *God* 133). Similar to what her ex-boyfriends have done to her, she has no curiosity about what Booker thinks, feels or does either. For instance, Bride thinks the small rose tattooed on his left shoulder is an ugly scar, his only physical defect. However, it is in effect Booker's unique way of memorializing his dear brother and a gesture of identifying with his "twin" brother. It indicates that Bride holds no genuine care for the man she claims to love, and her "love" only stays at the shallow pleasure of Booker's accompany: "I never thought about that part of his life because what was important in our relationship, ... was the fun we had" (Morrison, *God* 61). Likewise, Booker reciprocates her love with equal shallowness and vanity. He falls in love with her for her stunning appearance and flawless personality and abruptly abandons her because of "finding out" her moral impurity. Their relationship is like "the fairy-tale castle" which "collapsed into the mud and sand on which its vanity was built" (Morrison, *God* 135).

In addition to romantic relationships, Bride is used to managing interpersonal relationships with other people in her life in terms of material bonding. For one thing, Bride keeps a distancing relationship with her mother after she becomes independent and successful. Except for sending money, she does not call or visit her mother in the nursing home. For another, Bride is reluctant to face her past misdeed of perjury against Sofia positively. She is unwilling to deal with the damage she has brought to Sofia wholeheartedly, reckoning that sending Sofia money and helping

her start a brand-new life is a kind of compensation. Moreover, Bride's friendship with her only close friend Brooklyn is shallow and fake. The both distrust and disapprove of each other.

### **Ethical Choice: Unconditional Care**

As aforementioned, Morrison contends that Bride's skin color is both a hammer and a golden ring for her, but "neither the hammer nor the ring, helped make the character a sympathetic human being" (Morrison, "Color..." 51). Indeed, "Bride has been so focused on her own sufferings and successes that she has been incapable of empathy" (Wyatt 185). To confront Bride's lack of sympathy and emotional bonding, Morrison presents a new ethical choice that Bride makes while tracking Booker. After being abandoned by Booker, Bride aims to find out truth about their relationships, which therefore brings about her ethical transformation. She eventually learns to show unconditional care to others. Unconditional care emphasizes the responsibility, emotion, and mutual care between people and re-establishes the relationships between people through caring and concern. To Morrison, it is important for her protagonist Bride to "care deeply and to be human completely" (Morrison, "Price..." 53) because "Only caring unselfishly for somebody else would [she] accomplish true maturity" (Morrison, "Color..." 50).

Bride's ethical transformation begins with a renewed understanding of material wealth. It comes from the influence of the Steve family's hippie way of living. Compared with Bride's previous highly capitalistic life, "Here she was among people living the barest life," a simplistic and primitive mode of living she has never experienced before (Morrison, *God* 90). When Bride comments sarcastically on the Steves' poverty, Steve counters, "Money get you out of that Jaguar? Money save your ass?" (Morrison, *God* 91) Shamefully, Bride admits that indeed she does not "know anyway about good for its own sake, or love without things," for her previous life is filled with conditional relationships based on "things" (Morrison, *God* 92). The simplicity of living with the Steves nurtures a high sense of simplicity in Bride herself and brings her out of the trap of shallowness in the world of commercial success and emotional scarcity.

The Steve family not only renew Bride's understanding of material wealth but also greatly touch her by showing what "unconditional care" is. To Bride's surprise, they are "putting themselves out for her without hesitation, asking nothing in return", and "they simply tended her, fed her, arranged for her car to be towed for repair" (Morrison, *God* 90). It is too hard, too strange for Bride to understand the kind of "care" they offered—"free, without judgement or a passing interest in

who she was or where she was going" (Morrison, *God* 90). Bride cannot understand unconditional care because she has never been given one and has never shown others. It is under their influences that Bride starts to be engaged in open and in-depth communication with them and concentrate on showing cares to others, which preludes more healthy human relationships between her and others.

Bride's renewed understanding of material wealth and human relationships is followed by her ethical choice of unconditional care. A commitment to the ethics of caring is more than civilizing, ethical or humane, as Morrison has commented: "it's humanizing" (Morrison, "Price..." 51). It starts with a feeling of empathy: "From a relational perspective, human beings are seen as experiencing a primary need for connection and essential emotional joining. This need is served by empathy which in authentic relatedness is characterized by mutuality. Further, in relationships, one comes to experience clarity about one's own experience and the others', the capacity for creating meaningful action, an increased sense of vitality and capacity for further connection" (van Mens--Verhulst, et al. 137). Bride regains her humanity by showing unconditional care to Rain and Queen, two symbolic figures in her life. To Bride, the orphaned Rain is like herself in childhood and Queen is the loving mother she craves but never has. Building connections with these two persons is a crucial step in Bride's spiritual maturity.

Bride's empathy for Rain is a demonstration of her ethical transformation. When Bride listens to Evelyn talking about how they found Rain on the street, she empathizes with Rain's experience, "shuddering as though it were she herself in that alley" (Morrison, *God* 96). When being told by Rain that her mother threw her out, Bride exclaims, "Why? Why would she do that? Why would anybody do that to a child?" (Morrison, *God* 101) More deeply, she thinks, "How could anybody do that to a child, any child, and one's own?" (Morrison, *God* 102) Bride's habitual self-absorption is cut through by the extreme of maternal rejection recounted by Rain: "She experiences fellow feeling for another's suffering—and at a deep level, as the disturbance in her stomach indicates" (Wyatt 185). During the process of her ethical performance, Bride listens like a good mother who credits her daughter's story of suffering. She cares as a mother would care about what Rain has to go through, empathizing deeply that she has to "[fight] against the danger of tears for anyone other than herself" (Morrison, *God* 103), which testifies to the sincerity of her empathy.

Bride's unconditional care for Rain serves as a different ethical choice from the one she makes about Sofia. It is embodied in her act of saving Rain from the shotgun. By raising her arm to block the bullet for Rain, she puts her own life in

danger to save another human being's life. In some sense, it shows that she changes her previous ethical choice against Sofia into ethical responsibility by wounding her arm symbolically, for the arm was used to point her finger at Sofia at court in her childhood. At the beginning of the story, her money and gift to Sofia bring out the latter's anger and triggers her violent beating. This time, Bride's wholehearted repentance is eventually echoed by Sofia's inner thoughts: "When I tend to my patients... in my mind I am putting the black girl back together, healing her, thanking her" (Morrison, *God* 77). Sofia apologizes in her mind for beating Bride, which indicates a far-reaching conciliation between the two.

Bride's unconditional care shown to a mother-like figure, Queen, is also significant in terms of her new ethical choice. As a third party, Queen functions as a bridge between Bride and Booker. It is she who offers Bride Booker's journals, through which Bride not only gets a full account of Booker's attachment to her but also gets over her wrongful understanding of her body and identity. Queen urges Bride to confront Booker with an open heart while helping Booker dispel his obsession with "pure love". Under her help, the two lovers finally confront each other and clarify their misunderstanding. Furthermore, Bride confesses her sin of committing perjury against Sofia for the first time in her life, which relieves her conscious burden. Later, Queen is hospitalized because of the fire and becomes a helpless patient. When Bride is taking care of her with Booker: "They worked together like a true couple, thinking not of themselves, but of helping somebody else" (Morrison, *God* 167). Their relationship becomes congenial, for their focus is on a third person they both love.

Bride's unconditional care for Queen triggers the recovery of her physical wholeness as well as humanity. Having conciliated with Booker, Bride receives Queen's gold earrings from Booker and is thrilled to find the return of tiny holes on her earlobes. The new pair of gold rings signifies her emotional connection with Queen, which is different from the pair she got in her childhood from Sweetness. At that time, Bride's negative ethical choice gave her the holes on her earlobes and the fake golden earrings, symbolizing the "conditional", "motherlike" love that Bride gets from her biological mother. Whereas this time, she wins trust and love from a mother-like figure for her confession of the previous sin, and most importantly, through unconditional care shown to others.

The unconditional care that a brand-new Bride performs to others is in sharp contrast with the materialized interpersonal relationships she used to manage, which shows Morrison's ethical judgement of humanistic care over material bonding. Bride's cathartic journeys help her to know more about herself and instill the ethics

of care and humanity in her heart. She now has every reason to look forward to a new kind of love—"a long life of intimacy" that she has been craving all along (Morrison, *God* 39).

### **Ethical Theme: Natural Love**

Bride's experiences from the ethical dilemma of conditional relationships to the ethical choice of unconditional care highlight Morrison's advocating of "natural love." "Love" is a constant motif in Morrison's oeuvre: "Actually, I think, all the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence. . . . I think that I still write about the same thing, which is how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on to it. . . . or are tenacious about love. About love and how to survive" (Bakerman 60). To Morrison, love is a way of survival for her characters. In *God Help the Child*, natural love is an access for Bride to survive racialized and materialized relationships. Morrison makes her stance on the theme of natural love through plotting and characterization.

First of all, Morrison seriously critiques conditional relationships through the magical realist plotting of Bride's bodily devolution. Bride wakes up one day to find her ear lobes unpierced. Soon, her pubic hair vanishes, and her breasts have gone flat. Her body gradually degenerates to the state of an immature girl, who can only wear the clothes of little Rain. With all these changes in the body, Bride senses a strangely delayed menstrual period. As the parts of her body that signal contemporary norms of beauty and womanhood outright disappear, she undergoes a "crazed transformation back into a scared little black girl" (Morrison, *God* 142), devolving back to the self-pitied, poor little black girl who is not loved by anyone.

The radical alteration in Bride's body is the negative consequence of conditional love, a product of prevailing colorism and materialism. On the one hand, Bride's physical transformation is caused by Sweetness' conditional maternal love in her childhood. It reveals her desire to return to the state of a baby and being oneness with her mother so that she might enjoy unconditional care and natural love. On the other hand, because of conditional interpersonal relationships, it is still easy for Bride to feel like she is "melting away" or "erased" by others even in adulthood (Morrison, *God* 38). The breakdown of Bride's body begins when Bride is abandoned by Booker with the latter's words: "You not the woman I want" (Morrison, *God* 8). It indicates that Bride's materialized love life does not strengthen her in maturity or self-assurance. On the contrary, it weakens her confidence and self-esteem. Therefore, when faced with interpersonal crisis, her body devolves to the ugly little black girl who is not loved or admired by anyone.

Morrison's critique of unnatural love is further conveyed through the characterization of two figures, namely Queen's marital experiences and Booker's love for his dead brother Adam. Queen "knew from personal experience how hard loving was, how selfish and how easily sundered" (Morrison, *God* 158). To her, unnatural love is hard to last for long, and its selfishness harms people's relationships and sometimes destroys people's lives. In Queen's wisdom of love, "Youth being the excuse for that fortune-cookie love—until it wasn't, until it became pure adult stupidity" (Morrison, *God* 158). Young people's love is based on luck mostly, which becomes stupid when they are old. Queen's love is also shallow and naïve when she is young; therefore, her love has been abused by her ex-husbands for practical purposes: "American citizenship, U.S. passport, financial help, nursing care or a temporary home" (Morrison *God* 159). Thus, Queen becomes a victim of unnatural love: her children are taken away from her, leaving her in isolation in her senior years.

Booker's unnatural love is represented in his insistence on "love of purity," which cost him a harmonious family bonding and his romance with Bride. Morrison criticizes Booker's love for his favorite brother as being unnatural and conditional: "Except for Adam I don't know anything about love. Adam had no faults, was innocent, pure, easy to love. Had he lived, grown up to have flaws, human failings like deception, foolishness, and ignorance, would he be so easy to adore or be even worthy of adoration?" (Morrison, *God* 160) Therefore, Booker chastises himself that "What kind of love is it that requires an angel and only an angel for its commitment?" (Morrison, *God* 160) In Morrison's view, "love of purity" is not natural love; it is not love at all.

Moreover, Morrison depicts Bride's epiphany to natural love alongside the Steve family's emotional bonding, as apposed to Bride's former experience of being rejected by her community and family. While Sweetness' raising of Bride lacks natural love, Steve, Evelyn and Rain are well versed in the way of conducting themselves in positive relationships, which opens Bride's eyes to a loving family. When she listens to Steve and Evelyn sharing their love story, Bride can see "the light of pleasant memories shining in the looks they exchanged" (Morrison, *God* 91). Their romantic relationship is true and genuine, with reciprocating care and love for each other. When she hears Evelyn singing with Rain, she envies a lot—"How nice it would have been if mother and daughter could have sung together" (Morrison, *God* 87). In a certain sense, the Steve family serve as a moral model of natural love for Bride. "Moral model is.....a rational person, who moves people by virtue.....and continuously improves morality in ethical choices.....are equipped

with the ability to inspire people”(Nie *Introduction* 248). Steve, Evelyn and Rain not only save Bride’s life but also bring self-consciousness out of Bride and lead her to an understanding of the true nature of love.

Last but not least, natural love helps Bride retrieve her physical beauty and survival of wholeness at the end of the story. She will welcome her newly bred child with Booker, whose arrival is about to open a new chapter in her life. The story ends with Morrison’s clear exposition of the theme of natural love: Bride is offered by Booker “..... the hand she had craved all her life, the hand that did not need a lie to deserve it, the hand of trust and caring for—a combination that some call natural love” (Morrison, *God* 175). Natural love is composed of “trust and caring for” and provides “comfort, emotional security” for Bride (Morrison, *God* 79). It creates the “shine of happiness” in the “dreamy eyes” of Bride and Booker, like those of Steve and Evelyn when they are telling their love stories (Morrison, *God* 175). As Morrison has commented, we are living “in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something” (Bakerman 60). Bride is a victim of racism and materialism, with the former denying her worth as a human being and the latter objectizing her as a commodity. Both deprive her of her humanity and natural relationships with others. However, Bride manages to “survive whole” at last, because she is lucky enough to “have the emotional strength and/or support from family and friends” (Morrison *Bluest* IX), and the damage to her life is reduced and erased by the power of natural love.

## Conclusion

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison clarifies her critique of Bride’s lack of humanity resulting from colorism and materialism and puts forward her ethical view. Through apposing two different kinds of human relationships and making her ethical judgement, Morrison shows her ethical choice of natural love, the kind of love that children are most likely to receive from their caregivers.

For one thing, Bride’s mother Sweetness rejects mother-daughter bonding in excuse of protecting her daughter from racism, which devastatingly hinders her daughter’s self-identification. The surreal devolution of Bride’s body into that of a little girl expresses a mix of temptation and resistance to remaining the “poor little black girl,” a victim of her mother’s cruel withholding of love. Thus, she wraps herself around memories of early trauma and hangs on to the identity of the traumatized child stuck in racism. The early teaching affects her adult life as well: she is used to dealing with all human relationships in conditional terms.

For another, the Steve family greatly influences Bride by showing her what

unconditional care is. The caring ethics shown by the Steve family reminds her that she can obtain emotional bonding and spiritual enrichment through genuine care and sincere love. Under their influences, Bride starts to concentrate the ethics of care on others and finally wins natural love from Booker and Queen.

All in all, Morrison reflects the urgency that one must overcome the ethical dilemma of conditional relationships to go forwards with unconditional care and natural love. Bride seems to have achieved the elusive aims of wholeness, self-admiration and communal care that Morrison's other young women characters—from Jadine in *Tar Baby*, to Nel in *Sula*, to Christine Cosy in *Love*—are still striving for.

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