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The Concept of Black Womanhood in Toni Morrison's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The diploma thesis deals with the concept of black womanhood in Toni Morrisonôs fiction. The theoretical part introduces Toni Morrison in context of African-American literature. The main themes and topics of her novels are explored as well. The analytical part focuses on individual female characters in Morrisonôs three novels - *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*.

Key words: Toni Morrison, black womanhood, analysis, Beloved, Sula, The Bluest Eye

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is a well-acknowledged author not only in the United States, where she comes from, but all over the world as well. She has been part of the literary world for almost fifty years and even now, in her eighties, she is still an active writer. Despite the fact that African-American literature is sadly often neglected in Czech secondary school syllabi, Morrisonôs name is well known among a large number of people.

The Nobel Prize winning novelist uses her own experience as a black woman to portray female characters that are truly three dimensional, intriguing, psychologically detailed, free of any stereotypes which are often forced on them and, most importantly, human. It was her compelling writing that caught my attention while reading *The Bluest Eye* for the first time and made me want to read more of her books. Eventually it led me to picking this particular topic for my thesis.

The aim of my diploma thesis is to analyze the female characters of Toni Morrisonôs novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*. The reason why I chose these three books in particular is the large amount of female characters of diverse personalities in each of them. I will be dealing with their individual characteristics, primarily paying attention to the feminine aspect and its relation to race, as well as comparing them to each other. I will also focus on the relationships between the characters in each of the three books.

The first chapter is focused on African-American women writers in general. Toni Morrison is only one of many black female authors in American literature. I will introduce some other significant women writers who contributed to African-American literature as well, including the popular Alice Walker or Maya Angelou. The connecting link between the writers will also be explored.

The next chapter is revolved around Toni Morrison, her life and literary work. Information about her background, early life and education is provided and her journey to become a worldwide famous writer is depicted. Her literary work is also listed in this chapter.

The main topics of Toni Morrisonôs novels are covered in the third chapter. I will introduce her writing style and deal with the most significant features of her books and the recurring themes that are common for her literary work. Specifically, I will focus on the topics of race and femininity and issues belonging in the African-American tradition, such

as motherhood and folklore. Furthermore, I will demonstrate them on the three selected books.

The last part of the thesis is concentrated on the analysis of the female characters of the novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved.* A brief plot summary of the books will be included at the beginning of each chapter to explain the context. Firstly, I will focus on *The Bluest Eye* and its women characters. The most attention is paid to the main character Pecola, who struggles as a black girl living in a world where Shirley Temple is the epitome of beauty. The relationships between the female characters play a very important part in *The Bluest Eye*, just like they do in the next book, *Sula*. This story follows a friendship between Nel, a good girl raised in an orderly house, and Sula, her polar opposite, who fights the stereotypes that are being forced on black women. Finally, I will analyze and compare the characters in Morrisonôs most popular and well-known novel, *Beloved*. This book concentrates on three generations of women - grandmother called Baby Suggs, her daughter-in-law Sethe and her daughter Denver. Moreover, a new mysterious woman Beloved intrudes in their lives and changes them greatly. The story deals with the question of family and the lengths a mother will go to provide for her children.

1 AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

The following chapter provides an overview of the history of black female American writers who have earned their place in the literary spotlight. They are chronologically put in the historical context starting with works of slaves leading up to contemporary literature.

ñIf thereôs a book you really want to read,
but it hasnôt been written yet, then you must write it.ò
ï Toni Morrison (Hult, 2015)

African-American literature is only marginally represented in the curriculums in Czech secondary schools as a part of world literature, which is rather unfortunate as it makes a large separate branch of American literature. Just like Asian, Native-American, Chicano or Jewish literature, black literature is as important as the one produced by white people because it provides valuable information about historical events and gives people better understanding of different cultures and experiences as well as an opportunity to learn from history.

African-American literature has developed in parallel with white literature ever since the late 18th century. It is integrated in the American literature as a whole, however the texts produced by black writers significantly differ from the literature written by their white counterparts. For black writers, writing was not only a pleasant way to escape from reality, it was a way to address the institutional racism and resist slavery and discrimination as well as fight for freedom and break stereotypes. It is however important to emphasize that most of these issues can be and are dealt with in contemporary literature as well. As Miller (2016, p. 5) points out, the horrors of slavery are so deeply rooted in African-American heritage that even now, a century and a half later, black people who were born long after it was abolished can feel the effects of it. And there is no other group of people who can express the feeling of inferiority and injustice better than African-American women.

Black women have always been a very specific group in the American society throughout the history. Especially in the 19th century when they had to face the struggles of

not only being black, which was considered an inferior race at the time, but they were also oppressed due to their gender.

At this time period, the white male supremacy dominated literature as well. Thus, female characters, and black female characters in particular, were written from the men's point of view and did not have a voice of their own. African-American men could share their views on being black in a predominantly white society but they could not depict the female aspect in their writing. Ultimately, it was black women who portrayed the true black female experience in their works accurately.

The first published literary work written by a black woman dates back to 1773. It was a collection of poems by a slave called Phyllis Wheatley. She was brought from Africa and sold to a wealthy Bostonian who bought her to serve his family. She proved to be a natural talent as she learned how to read and write in a short time. The family supported her poetry writing which helped her publish her collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Asante, Abarry, 1996, p. 220).

Wheatleyôs poems were followed by so called slave narratives in the 19th century, autobiographical accounts of escaped slaves. One of them was written by Harriet Jacobs, a literate slave who published her story as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in which she speaks out against the sexual abuse female slaves had to face. She was a powerful and strong activist who fought racism and discrimination her whole life (Rodriguez, 2007, p. 267). Harriet Jacob's narrative has a very important place in American literature. It is a proof of the terrible struggles she and other black women had to go through at the time of slavery.

Simultaneously with slave narratives, autobiographical spiritual narratives were published. They were mostly written by women evangelists, preachers, missionaries and spiritual leaders who used their religious beliefs and the Bible to protest white supremacy and false piety ñas it was used as a pretext for oppressionñ (Moody, 2003, p. 10). The best known representatives of such narratives were the devoted Christians Zilpha Elaw, Maria Stewart who was also a controversial public speaker (along with race related speeches, she also called out the ñpromiscuousò audience, consisting of black and white people, in one of her speeches), Jarena Lee, Nancy Prince (Page, 2007, p. 182, 536, 366, 477) and most importantly Sojourner Truth ï a preacher, an abolitionist and a womenôs rights activist who

participated in Civil War and even campaigned for Lincolnôs re-election (Painter, 1998, p. 4).

The first African-American novel was titled *Our Nig* (1859) and was written by a free black woman called Harriet Wilson. It is a slave narrative combined with a sentimental novel. It contains autobiographical elements with fiction and its main theme is the racial injustice and its consequences for all black people. (Knight, 2003, p.428)

The abolition of slavery at the end of Civil War in1865 marks a huge milestone for all African-Americans. By no means did it mean their lives would become instantly perfect but it was a massive leap forward in having more hopeful future, although, as historical records prove, it would take another hundred years to get there. The era which followed Civil War immediately was called the Reconstruction. It was a brief period during which African-Americans gained a voice in government. However, the backlash from white Southerners soon led to restoration of white supremacy in the South by establishing ñJim Crowò segregation, which ordered black people to use separate hospitals, schools, public transportation, banned them from having mixed marriages and restricted their voting rights (Gorman, Eaglestone, 2019). This all, however, did not prevent black women from continuing writing.

In literature, journalism gained more popularity at the time with Jannie Carter as one of the prominent journalists. She covered topics such as slavery and racism and also paid attention to politics and the subject of women's suffrage. Newspapers were a place for women to publish their fiction, essays and poems.

These literary genres were also the focus of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Harper had one of the strongest voices among black women in the late 19th century. She was a civil rights and womenôs rights activist, a member of numerous abolitionist societies and a public speaker. In her speeches, she addressed the differences in race, class and gender (Logan, 1999, 44-45).

African-American literature as well as other cultural fields such as art and music flourished in the period from the 1920s to the 1930s. This period known as Harlem Renaissance had a massive impact on the way the world viewed black people as many of them migrated from the rural South to the urban industrial North, and therefore entered the culturally richer society and black talent became recognized on an international level. New opportunities were given to talented black artists as they participated in free spirited inter-

racial events, and from their perspective Harlem Renaissance was a way to racial equality. This reflected in the literary work of the era which was more optimistic and celebrated blackness without shame. Black literature was no longer solely read by black people, it started to penetrate mainstream literature and increased curiosity about black culture among white people (Washington, 2001, p. 14).

One of the most significant women writers of the Harlem Renaissance was writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston. Her work was not well received at the beginning of her career by other black people. They complained about Hurston caricaturing black people and focusing on the lighter side of life instead of depicting the harsh truth. However, with time, her writing, including her most famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* found its place in the world literature and became an American classic (Aberjhani, West, p. 165).

The Civil Rights Movement period was another significant milestone in African-American history. In culture, it interweaved with Black Arts Movement which produced numerous prolific male writers as well as some talented female authors, including the poets Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez and Gwendolyn Brooks, who was the first black woman ever to receive a Pulitzer Prize for her book of poems *Annie Allen*. They were some of the active protesters against the segregation, using their poetry to support black community. Brooks in particular puts emphasis on the responsibility of writers and the awareness of the audience (Smith, Wynn, 2009, p. 18).

Black literature finally became properly acknowledged by white audience too in the 1970s. African-American literature as a genre became a legitimate part of the mainstream American literature. During this time, prominent black women writers, who have since gained worldwide recognition, came into the literary spotlight. Not only did they achieve fame but a lot of their work was also awarded. Women were the dominant leaders of this new generation of writers.

One of the successful authors that belong to contemporary African-American literature was Maya Angelou. She was a black civil rights campaigner and a close friend of the Civil Rights Movement leading men Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X (Sickles, 2010, p. 9). She is most known for her autobiographies, including *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), which are once again revolved around the life trauma of a black woman growing up without basic human rights. Moreover, she deals with topics such as family and motherhood, sexual abuse, spirituality and identity.

Some of the African-American women felt the lack of representation in literature and started digging in the past which resulted in rediscovering of some old works by the 19th and early 20th century writers. Alice Walker, for example, brought back the interest in Zora Neale Hurstonôs novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which was neglected at the time. Walker was a self-proclaimed ñwomanistò which was essentially a term for a black feminist who primarily focuses on black women issues. Her most notable novel is *The Color Purple* (1982) - a story about overcoming sexual and racial oppression and finding success and happiness. Walker was the first black woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (Sickles, 2010, p. 12).

Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize winner, touches on the theme of self-hatred and colorism in her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In her most popular novel *Beloved*, she brings up slavery to the front. Morrisonôs literary work will be dealt with in the following chapter.

Since the 70s, African-American literature has expanded greatly. It has spread into all genres exploring all kinds of topics, such as race, sexuality, technology, religion, politics, cultural identity etc. As it always has been, the book subjects reflect current events. Most recently, for example, it has been the issue of police shooting directed at black citizens, which is the topic of Angie Thomasôs novel *The Hate You Give* (2017).

To sum up, ever since the slave era, black womanhood has been the main subject of African-American women writersô work. Black women have always had to fight for something ï their freedom, their rights, their place in a dominantly male world, their success. Race has been the theme that defined black literature but it was also interpersonal relationships that became a major subject of it: relationships between men and women, mothers and daughters, friends, a woman and God, as well as connection between the heroine and her ancestors. Literature became a way for black people to share their experience and celebrate their blackness. The 70s brought a new generation of black women writers who explored the psychological side of the female characters in their novels and did not simply write them as victims, but on the contrary, they were written as complete, flawed, vulnerable human beings, trying to find their place in the society.

2 TONI MORRISON - LIFE AND LITERARY WORK

In the following chapter I will introduce Toni Morrison, firstly by looking into her childhood and then I will pay attention to her journey of becoming a globally acknowledged author, as well as her accomplishments and published writings.

Toni Morrison has been in the centre of African-American contemporary literature ever since she first started writing in her thirties. She is considered one of the most influential women in the United States. She is an author of several novels, plays, children's books and non-fiction literary works, as well as an editor, teacher and a professor emeritus at the prestigious Ivy League Princeton University.

Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on the 18th of February 1931 in the small town called Lorain in the north-eastern Ohio as the second of four children. In the thirties the United states were dealing with the Great Depression which put millions out of work and which also had an impact on the Woffords as they struggled financially at the time (Hinds, 2012, p. 13). According to Li (2010, p. 1), there was a time the family could not afford the rent which led to the landlord setting their apartment on fire. They moved several times during Morrison's childhood. Morrison decided to set her first novel *The Bluest Eye* in the times of Great Depression and use her own experience with poverty for her writing.

Both Morrison's parents were born in the South where racial segregation was enforced and the living conditions became dangerous for black people. Due to the fact, their families moved north during the Great Migration. Toni, or Chloe, as that is the name Morrison was called by back then, attended an integrated school. In spite of the school being opened to black children as well as the white ones, she was the only African-American pupil in her class and had to face racism from the early youth. Moreover, her parents and grandparents told her stories about their own experience with violence against black people and the horrible way they have been treated by their white neighbours. Morrison later used this experience, as well as other stories, such as those about ghosts of her deceased relatives and other spiritual themes her parents talked to her about, for her writing.

In 1949 Morrison graduated with honours from Lorain High School. She was passionate about literature since she was a child so it only made sense she found a job in a local library during her high school years. She worked as a secretary to the librarian. Later the town named a reading room in the library the Toni Morrison room (Li, 2010, p. 6).

She continued her studies at Howard University in Washington DC and just like in elementary school and high school, she was one of the best students there. She joined the theatre group at Howard and college was also where she earned the nickname ĂToniñ. She received her B.A. degree in 1953 and two years later she graduated from Cornell University with a Master of Arts degree in English. After finishing her studies she started teaching, first at Texas Southern University and then also at Howard (Morrison, 2008, p. 19).

In 1958, Toni got married to a Jamaican architect Harold Morrison with whom she has two sons (Hinds, 2012, p.17). However, the marriage only lasted for six years and Morrison moved to New York to become an editor until the early 1980s when she left the job to become a full-time writer.

The real breakthrough in her career happened in 1970, which was the year her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* was published. In the following years she wrote several other novels including *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977) or *Tar Baby* (1981). To this day, Morrison's most acclaimed novel is *Beloved*, which was published in 1987. It won numerous literary awards including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. In 2006 The New York Times named the novel the best work of American fiction of the last 25 years. *Beloved* was also adapted into a film of the same name. Toni Morrison reached the peak of her career in 1993 when she received the Nobel Prize in Literature as the first African-American woman in history.

As of 2019, Morrison published several other novels, including *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and most recently *God Help the Child* (2015). Apart from writing novels, she is also an author of books for children, plays and song lyrics. Over the years she has received over thirty awards, nominations and honorary titles.

Morrison contributed to the African-American literature on a huge scale as she exclusively focuses on black experience in her novels. Her books frequently include topics such as slavery, life of African-American people after the abolition of slavery, oppression and violence. The main characters of her novels are often black women struggling with their own identity.

3 MAIN TOPICS OF MORRISON'S NOVELS

The following chapter deals with the main themes and topics of Toni Morrisonôs novels which often recur in her books. Namely, it is the theme of blackness and racism, womanhood and sexuality, motherhood, quest for identity and folklore and myth. Moreover it is explored how these themes are represented in *The Bluest Eye, Sula* and *Beloved.*

3.1 Blackness and racism

Unlike many other writers, Toni Morrison is fine with being labelled as a ñblack writerñ and she is quite clear about who her books are meant for. In her interview for The Guardian (2015), Morrison says: ĂI'm writing for black people, in the same way Tolstoy was not writing for me, a 14 year-old coloured girl from Lorain, Ohio.ñ Morrison is completely unapologetic about writing solely about and for black people. She adds, with a reference to comments made by a critic: ñI donôt have to apologise or consider myself limited because I donôt [write about white people] ï which is not absolutely true, there are lots of white people in my books. The point is not having the white critic sit on your shoulder and approve it.ñ

In her literary work, Toni Morrison predominantly focuses on her African-American heritage. As a black woman who grew up in the United States of America in the time of segregation, she drew inspiration for her novels from her own experience. She even set her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* in her home town Lorain, Ohio. Moreover, she used the stories her father, mother and grandmother told her as sources for her literary work. Her parents and grandparents, who all grew up under different circumstances, have had a major influence on her writing. Morrison often goes back in history for example to write about slavery and post-slavery era and even though the characters and stories are mostly fictional, it is because of her ancestry her books have a feeling of authenticity to them.

Whether the story takes place in the nineteenth century or in the 1930s, there is always apparent racial tension between black and white people depicted. Morrison explores the life African-Americans had to live under the oppression and the way they were treated and dehumanized by white people. In *Sula,* for example, they are manipulated to live in a place in the hills of infertile soil and undesirable neighbourhood because the land they were promised was occupied by whites. Morrison clearly refers to the history of white people taking over properties that does not belong to them from time immemorial.

In *Beloved*, the subject of the traumatic and devastating effect of slavery on black people is brought up. The main character Sethe is quite literally haunted by her past and feels the oppression even after gaining freedom. Nevertheless, Morrison does not portray white people as one-dimensional altogether cruel beings either, which is shown in the part of the novel where Sethe meets a white girl who helps her escape.

As far as the subject of race is concerned, Morrison discusses the racial issues within the black community as well. People are divided by class as well as the tone of their skin. *The Bluest Eye* points out the colorism (aka discrimination of light-skinned black people against dark-skinned people; Tharps, 2016) which is rooted in the European beauty standards. The main character is shamed for her dark skin and blames the lack of love from her community on her colour. She does not even find sympathy from her mother who feels more comfortable in her white racist employerôs house than with her family.

In conclusion race plays a significant part in all Toni Morrisonôs novels. She explores various struggles black people had to face whether it is the oppression coming from whites or the inner fight of an individual who is disconnected from a community in one way or another.

3.2 Womanhood and sexuality

For openers, it is worth mentioning that in spite of largely focusing on female characters and their mentality, Toni Morrison rejects to be called a feminist. Firstly, she points out that there is a huge difference between white feminists and black feminists. In her interview with Christopher Bolen for Interview Magazine (2012) she explains that the two groups were fighting different fights. While white woman put emphasis on not being forced into having children, for black women, such as Margaret Garden, the escaped slave who Sethe from *Beloved* was based on, having children they could raise themselves was kind of a blessing. Moreover, white feminists only fought for their rights, they were ñalways having very important meetings, but leaving their maids behindñ (Morrison for Interview Magazine, 2012).

Secondly, the reason why she does not like to be called a feminist is that she wants to stay free in her imagination as much as possible and does not wish for the readers to be discouraged by thinking her novels are ñfeminist tractsñ (Morrison, 2008).

Regardless, her books definitely have feminist undertone as the focus in her novels is put mainly on black women, who are to this day perhaps the most discriminated against group. She writes about their struggle with racial oppression and sexual oppression as well as stereotyping, violation of womanhood, their search for identity et cetera. She explores the relationships within the black community, between men and women, mothers and daughters, friends, and how these relationships develop in a world dominated by white people.

Morrison does not shy away from the topic of sexuality, sexism, rape and even incest. The latter is an important subject of her first novel *The Bluest Eye,* along with the loss of innocence. Several characters in the book have their first sexual experience which goes horribly in all cases. Frieda is groped by Henry but is comforted by her loving parents, Pecola, on the other hand, experiences a much more terrifying first sexual encounter, when she is raped by her own father. We also get to know Chollyôs first sexual experience which is utterly humiliating and a reason for Chollyôs growing hate and violent behaviour towards women. Morrison makes a point about young black girls being viewed as ugly for the colour of their skin while at the same time being wrongfully sexualized and thus robbed of their childhood.

In *Beloved*, sexual violence plays a major role in the story as it is one of the factors that shaped some of the main characters. As Staples (2006, p. 19) points out, black women often served as sexual objects in the slave era and it was rather common for white men to force them to give up their bodies. Moreover, it was also black men who were sexually abused and exploited. In *Beloved*, the character of Paul D. has experienced sexual abuse from his owner and thus understands sex to be means of power and control and uses it to secure his place in Setheôs home (Morrison, 1973, p. 53). Even Beloved later uses sex to gain control over Paul D. and to drive him away.

Setheôs mother abandoned her child that was born as a result of rape out of disgust and Sethe herself, marked by the trauma she had to endure, kills her child so she would not have to go through the same experience. Morrison gives us a clear picture of how black women were viewed by slave owners as nothing but instruments for breast-feeding and birthing more workers and how their bodies were violated by them, which is presented in the passage where Sethe is assaulted and her breast milk is stolen by Schoolteacher (Morrison, 1973, p. 8). This dehumanization of black women is also shown in *The Bluest Eye* in the part where Pauline is in a hospital to give birth and the doctor compares her to a horse,

because they do not feel pain during delivery either. The doctor then proceeds to talk to a white woman, ignoring Pauline completely and leaving her with no information about her delivery whatsoever (Morrison, 1970, p. 125).

In *Sula*, Morrison emphasizes the difference between the two main characters, Sula and Nel, in regards to their sexuality. Sula is sexually liberated, she seeks out relationships with married men and eventually seduces Nelôs husband too. She finds this kind of behaviour normal because of her upbringing. Nel, on the other hand, is much more conservative in relationships with men. She quickly settles down, gets married and becomes a good mother for this is the morally right life any woman is supposed to live according to the society. From Nelôs perspective, the main purpose of having sex is to create family while Sula sees pleasure in it (Rodriguez, p. 13). Sula breaks stereotypes of a submissive woman in a patriarchal relationship. She takes power over men instead of obeying them, in contrast to her mother, who ñmade the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he wasò (Morrison, 1973, p. 43). She owns her sexuality and for that she represents ñthe badò for the community, while the well-mannered Nel who does not own it, represents ñthe good.ò

3.3 Motherhood

According to OôReilly (2004, p. 4), motherhood is valued greatly in African-American culture. Black mothersô main goal is to protect their children, who are bound to grow up in a racist and sexist world, empower them and teach them how to protect themselves. In addition, it is through mothers that children learn about their cultural and historical values which are extremely important for preserving the African-American heritage (OôReilly, 2004, p. 12). Motherhood was also a way for women to gain some kind of power which black women lacked in almost every aspect.

Motherhood is a theme that plays a significant part in all three Morrisonôs novels I will be focusing on. She explores this theme from numerous points of view as manifested below.

Firstly, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explores the darker side of motherhood, which is how devastating the consequences of a toxic mother-daughter relationship can be. Pauline projects her own self-loathing onto her daughter Pecola who just like her mother believes only white skin is beautiful. In fact, it begins as soon as Pecola is born, with

Pauline saying: ñI knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.ò (Morrison, 1970, p. 126). Pauline manifests motherly love only with the white child whose family house she works at. Moreover, she does so in front of Pecola, which results in her feeling unloved and unattractive and desiring blue eyes and eventually drives her insane.

This all stands in contrast to Frieda and Claudiaôs mother, who is very caring, albeit rather strict. For example, there is a passage about Claudia remembering the time she was ill and her mother took care of her, which has a rather warm feeling to it. In contrast, Pauline not only does not feel sympathy towards Pecola after she is brutally raped by Cholly, she beats her on top of that. The difference between the two approaches to motherhood is very palpable in this novel.

Although the friendship between Sula and Nel lies in the centre of *Sula* (1973), the mother-daughter relationships are key in this novel as well. Morrison points out the importance of motherôs influence on her daughter. The oldest of the Peace women, Eva, has quite a distant relationship with her daughter Hannah. Eva is portrayed as a mother who is willing to do anything for her children. She later even goes as far as setting her own son on fire to rescue him from his heroin addiction. Her other children, especially Hannah, struggle to understand her actions. Due to Evaôs ability to provide material needs for her children but not emotional connection, love and empathy, Hannah and Sula also do not possess any caretaking skills. In addition, none of the Peace women is able to maintain a romantic relationship. There is especially a similarity between Hannah and Sula who keep having affairs with married men.

Nel, who is seemingly the opposite of Sula, deals with the same problem with her mother Helen at core. Helen, ashamed of her upbringing, obsessively controls Nelôs life and as a result becomes emotionally distant just like Eva and Hannah. Moreover, both Nel and Sulaôs influence of their mothers affects their future lives as Nel follows Helenôs example and marries well and has children, while Sula similarly to her mother, refuses to submit herself to conventional life.

In *Beloved*, the theme of motherhood plays a crucial role. For this novel, Morrison chose to depict a mother in the time of slavery, who simply cannot create a real bond with her children as it is disrupted by slavery from the very beginning. The emphasis is put on the importance of breast-feeding as an essential part of the mother-child bond. Demetrakopoulos (1992) points out the paradox that occurs in Setheôs story, where she loves her children so much she would rather see them dead than living in the abhorrent reality. Accord-

ing to Mock (1996), Morrison also deals with the issue of ownership. Sethe has a very strong maternal instinct and considers her children to be an integral part of herself and claims ownership of them, however she is a slave and therefore cannot own anything, not even her children and as we find out, not even her breast milk. Sethe is constantly haunted by her past, most recently by Beloved, the reincarnation of her daughter she killed with the intention to protect her. Even as a free woman, she cannot escape oppression, this time from Beloved, who gets excessively attached to her.

3.4 Quest for identity

The identity issue related to African-American people is rooted deep in history when they were first forcibly taken from their native land and brought to America. It is due to slavery and its inhumane treatment of people that todayôs black Americans are lacking information about their origin.

Long after slavery was abolished, African-Americans were still trying to cope with the question of freedom. Since this basic human need was denied to them for such a long period of time, they struggled to find their true self. Black women in particular had to deal with numerous forms of oppression. They had to fight racial discrimination, beauty standards or sexual abuse to name a few (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 169). Moreover, there were stereotypes African-Americans could not really escape that made it hard for them to build their own identity.

As Beaulieu (2003) points out, Toni Morrison largely focuses on how the characters approach life − whether they intend to spend it living in shadows, suppressing their identities or live wholly and fight the oppression.

This can be easily demonstrated on the characters Pecola and Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*. They both have to face the prejudice that comes with their physical appearance and their poor background. The internalized beauty standards are visible throughout the whole book. Whether it is Claudiaôs white dolls, Paulineôs idealization of the white family she works for and white film stars or the encounter with light-skinned well-dressed child who makes the girls feel inferior. However, unlike Claudia, who recognizes the danger of intra-racism and judgment based on wealth and refuses to succumb to self-hatred, Pecola is ultimately destroyed by the white norms that define society. Her unrealistic desire for blue eyes, as a way to be loved and accepted, leads her to insanity (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 170).

Quest for identity is a crucial theme in *Sula*. The main characterôs personality is affected by overhearing her own mother saying she does not love her. As a result, Sula learns how to live independently. She loses the sense of belonging and feels separated from the community. She knows she and Nel are ñneither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to themò (Morrison, 1973, p. 52) and decides to rebel against the social norms. Later in the story, she even answers her grandmotherôs question about marriage and babies as follows: ñI donôt want to make somebody else. I want to make meò (Morrison, 1973, p. 92). Freedom, which was such a precious thing for a black woman, becomes Sulaôs primary interest. She does not care about anyone but herself and shows no remorse when she indirectly causes the death of a young boy, watches her mother being burned without helping her or when she sleeps with her best friendôs husband. Her longing for independence and freedom leave her with no sense of responsibility and as a result she becomes the townôs pariah and eventually dies alone (Nelson, 1999, p. 336).

In *Beloved*, Setheôs identity is entirely defined by slavery or more specifically white people. Slaves were stripped of their own identity along with their humanity. She became a victim of both racial and sexual abuse and even after establishing new home, Sethe cannot escape the marks slavery left on her, neither can she stop thinking about her daughter she murdered in order to protect her. Sethe connects her self-identity with motherhood: ñThe best thing she was, was her childrenò (Morrison, 1987, p. 251). Her real search for identity begins with the arrival of Beloved who is a link between her past and present. Her appearance opens Setheôs old wounds and forces her to cope with her past and ultimately understand herself. Consequently, Setheôs quest for identity also helps shape Denverôs own identity and personality, which was until then defined by her motherôs experience.

3.5 Folklore and myth

According to Beaulieu (2003), African mythology plays a significant role in African-American writing. Toni Morrison is no exception. She uses mythical elements in her stories as a spiritual connection between the characters and their ancestors as well as points out the differences between African tradition and life of black people in the United States at the time. These elements are heavily featured in *Beloved* as well as Morrisonôs other books. By including African mythology in her work, Morrison pays homage to the continent of Africa, the home of her ancestors and ancestors of African-Americans in general,

who were forcefully brought to America, and also their wisdom, which they passed down on to their children.

Folklore is an essential part of Morrisonôs novels because she, just like many other African-American writers, uses it as a connecting link between ñthe ways of knowing lost in the violence of slavery, and the world that enslaved Africans insisted on making for themselves in America against all oddsò (Irele, Jeyifo, p. 136). Folklore was the basis of African-American literature as oral tradition was the only way for the majority of slaves to pass their important values forward.

Morrison takes old phrases, stories, myths and uses them in her work to connect the old traditions with new communities. In addition she writes in African-American Vernacular English which might be challenging to read, especially for a non-native speaker, but helps the readers emotionally connect and relate with the stories and the characters and also gives the stories a hint of genuineness. Her writing involves merging fiction with oral tradition. According to Morrison, it is important to involve the reader, who supplies the emotions, some of the colour and some of the sound while participating in the story (Harris, 1991).

Cultural beliefs as a major aspect of African-American folklore play a significant part in *The Bluest Eye*. The story essentially revolves around the old myth that black means ugly and unworthy and poor means lesser, which was invented by white supremacists and has spread through black communities as well.

The Bluest Eye also includes magical elements. In an interview with Mel Watkins (Morrison, 1994, p. 46), Morrison explains that superstition is part of black folklore. Believing in magic and ghosts belongs to their heritage. In this novel it is represented in Claudia and Friedaôs belief that their marigolds would help save Pecolaôs baby. Pecola herself believes she can have blue eyes and in order to get them, she visits Soaphead Church. In this particular part, Morrison sort of ridicules the magical aspect of African-American folklore and the naivety of the girl. In a way, Pecolaôs story of a young girl who is wishing for blue eyes might even seem like a fairy tale material. Nevertheless, unlike the ugly duckling and other fairy tale characters, Pecolaôs quest for love and acceptance clashes with the cruel reality and she gets the opposite of a happy ending.

Morrisonôs fiction has got enormous depth to it. Apart from combining literature with oral tradition and folklore, she is also fascinated by Greek mythology and creates

many parallels between her fiction and old Greek myths. In her study, Karen Stein (2009, p. 47) remarks the similarities between *The Bluest Eye* and the Demeter ï Persephone myth, in which Persephone is raped and abducted by Hades and her mother Demeter causes soil infertility in the process of mourning. Similarly, Claudia and Frieda plant the seeds in hope to protect Pecolaôs baby but they do not grow either. The most striking difference here is the reactions of the mothers Demeter and Pauline. While Demeter searches for her daughter, Pauline beats hers and pushes her further away.

The mythical undertone of *Sula* begins with the very first sentence of the book which reminds us of the well-worn ñonce upon a timeò phrase that we can find at the beginning of many fairy tales (Bloom, 1999, p. 106). ñIn that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighbourhood.ò (Morrison, 1973, p. 3). While her first novel was set in the real town of Lorain, in her second one Morrison establishes a fictitious place ironically called *the Bottom* which she describes in a very vibrant fairy tale-like way on the first pages. However, just like in *The Bluest Eye*, it is soon revealed that the reality differs greatly from any fairy tale.

In terms of myths and folklore, *Sula* primarily concentrates on putting opposites against each other. The question of good and evil, which is an essential element of African-American folklore, plays a significant role in the novel. Moreover, Morrison explores the relationship between an individual and community. Other opposites, such as presence and absence or love and hate are also represented in the story.

Stein (2009, p. 55) points out the mythical symbols in *Sula*: numerous deaths caused by fire and water, dreams, signs and marks. Sulaôs birthmark, for example, is interpreted in numerous ways throughout the novel.

The ending of the novel suggests Morrisonôs belief in the spiritual world of afterlife. Sula literally describes her feelings at the moment of her death: ñShe noticed that she was not breathing, that her heart had stopped completely. A crease of fear touched her breast, for any second there was sure to be a violent explosion in her brain, a grasping for breath. Then she realized, or rather sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didnôt have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. ôWell, Iôll be damned,ô she thought, ôit didnôt even hurt. Waitôll I tell Nel.ôò (Morrison, 1973, p. 149).

Toni Morrison based Setheôs character in *Beloved* on a real story of a runaway slave Margaret Garner who killed her own daughter rather than allowed her to be enslaved. Sethe is later haunted by the ghost of the dead baby who eventually returns in a physical form disguised as a woman called Beloved. Based on these aspects, one could classify *Beloved* as a gothic novel. The ghost ties Setheôs past to her present, highlighting the fact that her mind is still very much occupied by slavery and she has not managed to cope with the trauma the oppression has caused her.

Baby Suggs is another character who has died prior to the events of the novel but whose spirit lives on. Not only is she frequently present in the flashbacks but she also appears as a ghost to Denver in order to give her advice and help her to overcome her fear. Beaulieu (2003, p. 2) points out that in African-American folklore ña female often holds a leadership role in this ancestor community, even taking on a goddess-like qualityò and in this particular case Baby Suggs is the leading personality. She is also the character closest to her African roots. Taking on the role of a preacher, she helps other black women and men to find their spirituality, self-love and emotional stability. It is her leadership that helps Denver unite the women in the community to exorcise Belovedôs ghost and ease Setheôs mind as a result.

If *The Bluest Eye* bore a similarity to Persephoneôs myth, then it is not farfetched to look for a Greek myth parallel in *Beloved* as well. Sethôs murderous act could be compared to Medeaôs. However, in contrast to Medea, who killed her children as a revenge on Jason, Setheôs motive seems much more sympathetic as it is simply a result of her undying motherly love (Wetmore Jr., 2010, p. 137).

4 THE ANALYSIS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE BLUEST EYE, SULA AND BELOVED

The following part of the thesis focuses on the female characters of the three given novels ï *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved* respectively. Each chapter starts with a brief summary of the plot to provide the context of the analysed characters. It is then followed by individual analysis of selected women characters of each book.

4.1 The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* as her very first novel in 1970. The idea for the story came from a conversation she had with a schoolmate in elementary school. The little black girl told her she wanted blue eyes which made her mad, as she confesses in the afterword of *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1970). She says that it made her wonder for many years about ñwho made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?ò (p. 212).

In an interview for Visionary Project (2004), Morrison explains the reason behind writing the novel. In the mid-60s, at the time of social and culture upheaval in lives of African-American, black male writers in particular celebrated blackness in their work, stressing that black is beautiful etc. However, Morrison feared that they would forget the fact that black was not always seen as beautiful and that white and light-skinned people had privileges due to their physical characteristics. She decided to write about the fatal impact of racism on oneôs self-worth focusing on the most vulnerable group ï black female children ï who were never in the centre of anything. Morrison wanted to explore their feelings and place a little hurt black girl in the centre of her story. Moreover, she decided to surround Pecola by people like Claudia and Frieda, who Morrison compares to her and her sister, to show that there is also a thrill to being young (Visionary Project, 2008).

The *Bluest Eye* has raised mixed reactions since it was first published. Some critics praised Morrisonôs talent of depicting heavy themes and capturing ñthe living, bleeding heart of childhoodò perfectly (New York Times, 1970). On the other hand, the book has also raised controversy as it constantly appeared on the American Library Associationôs list for most challenged books since its publication. It was even banned from numerous

schoolsô reading lists for its ñsexually explicit material, graphic descriptions and lots of disturbing languageò (American Experience, 2017).

4.1.1 Summary

The story takes place in Lorain, Ohio just after the Great Depression. The novel opens with a short story for little children about a white family ñDick and Jane.ò It is repeated three times. The first time it is written clearly, the second repetition lacks punctuation and capitalization and the third has no spacing between words. It is followed by adult Claudiaôs short recollection of autumn 1941 which gives us insight into what will happen further in the novel. The story is divided into four parts.

Autumn

Nine-year old Claudia MacTeer lives with her sister Frieda in a poor yet loving family. The family takes in a boarder Mr. Henry and also a young girl Pecola Breedlove, whose abusive and alcoholic father burned their family home down. Pecola loves Shirley Temple who is in her eyes an epitome of beauty ï white and blue-eyed. Pecola herself prays for blue eyes as she believes her black eyes and black skin to be ugly. Breedlove family and living situation is described and the characters of Pecolaôs parents Cholly and Pauline are introduced in this part also.

Winter

Pecola, Frieda and Claudia meet a new girl, light-skinned wealthy Maureen who seems to have enchanted the entire school. First it appears the girls would become friends but Maureen soon starts to taunt Pecola. Frieda and Claudia defend her and Maureen ends up calling them all ugly.

Another unpleasant encounter Pecola has is with Junior. His mother Geraldine is a middle-class black woman who takes great care of herself. She is very neat and takes good care of her son, however she loves her cat more. She only allows Junior to play with other neat and polite ñcoloredò children and white children. Geraldineôs emotional distance causes that Junior becomes mean and sadistic. He lures Pecola in his house and when he sees her petting the cat, he kills the animal and blames it on Pecola. Geraldine responds with calling her ña nasty little black bitchò (Morrison, 1970, p. 92).

Spring

Mr. Henry is beaten by Mr. MacTeer and kicked out of the house after he touches Frieda inappropriately. The girls visit Pecola at the house that belongs to a white family

Pauline works for. Pecola accidentally spills hot blueberries all over herself, the floor and the little white girl who lived in the house. Pauline slaps and yells at Pecola while comforting the white girl.

Through flashbacks we learn about both Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline. Pauline has always felt like an outcast because of her lame foot and often gets lost in romantic fantasies. We also learn about Cholly's difficult childhood and adolescence which turned him into a violent and abusive person.

In the present day, Cholly comes home drunk one day and rapes Pecola. When she tries to tell her mother, Pauline beats her. Pecola visits a sham psychic Soaphead Church and asks him to give her blue eyes. He uses Pecola to kill a dog he hates for him and Pecola believes she will receive blue eyes.

Summer

Cholly rapes Pecola again and she becomes pregnant. Frieda and Claudia are the only ones hoping Pecola's baby will survive. They plant marigold seeds in belief that if the flowers bloom, the baby will live. However, the baby dies. Pecola seems to have turned insane as she carries a conversation with herself about her beautiful blue eyes.

The story is closed once again by now adult Claudia who is speculating about who and what is to blame for Pecolaôs tragic fate.

4.1.2 Pecola Breedlove

Pecola is an eleven-year-old dark-skinned girl who grows up in the world that discourages black people from feeling proud, worthy and beautiful. She is a victim of the internalized racism of the 1940s United States of America. Morrison demonstrates on this character how imposing of white norms and beauty standards on a black girl at her most vulnerable stage can destroy oneôs entire identity. Furthermore, she explores the racism within the community, which, instead of protecting the child, drives her into insanity. Morrison points out the fact that it is usually the hurt people who hurt others. In this case, the members of the community are all victims of the racial oppression who simply pass their pain onto the weakest link (Bhardwaj, 2016).

Morrison cleverly placed parts of the Dick and Jane story at the beginning of every chapter to juxtapose the ideal white family with Pecolaôs broken one. Pecola wishes to be like Jane. Her only wish in life is to be loved and accepted. Pecolaôs longing for love becomes apparent very early on when she asks Frieda and Claudia ñHow do you do that? I

mean, how do you get somebody to love you?ò (Morrison, 1970, p. 32) but never receives an answer. She never knew what love meant as it was something she was lacking her whole life. Ever since her first moments in the world, she has been told she was ugly and as she was growing up, this feeling of her was getting strengthened by almost everybody she has encountered. As her self-esteem gets repeatedly shattered, she decides the only way she could ever be accepted is if she were white with blue eyes. Lost in her own fantasy, she does not realize her dream is unrealistic and sets herself up for disappointment.

In spite of the fact that Pecola is the protagonist of the novel, she is rather a passive character. It is the circumstances she finds herself in and the people who surround her that define her personality and influence her way of thinking. She often appears to be invisible to people and she herself prays to God she would disappear. She gets ignored at school by classmates and teachers and she does not understand why: ñLong hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school...ò (Morrison, 1970, p. 45). However, she does not fight the system like Claudia, she gets consumed by it and accepts her fate which results in her tragic ending.

The Bluest Eye is essentially a coming-of-age story. At the beginning of the novel, Pecola is introduced as a vulnerable and fragile child. She is completely innocent and inexperienced. When she gets her first period, she does not know what is happening because her mother never prepared her for it. On the other hand, the younger Frieda has the knowledge because her mother taught her. She informs Pecola that she can have a baby now, to which Pecola replies: ***ñ****But...how?****ò*** (Morrison, 1970, p. 32). Knowing Pecolaôs inevitable faith beforehand makes the reader realize how quickly Pecola loses her innocence. Furthermore, she is gullible and easily inclined to get lost in her fantasies, so when she is told she is ugly, she believes it, just like she trusts Soaphead Church that he would get her blue eyes. Moreover, she accepts other peopleôs opinions as her own. For example, she is confused as to why people consider dandelions to be ugly. She thinks they are quite pretty and therefore almost realizes the beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Nevertheless, she quickly changes her mind after she is once again humiliated by a racist white clerk who looks at her with disgust, and she comes to a conclusion that the dandelions are indeed ugly. Pecolaôs innocence is ultimately forcibly taken by her father when he rapes and impregnates her. Instead of being shown compassion from her surroundings, she is expelled from school and banished from the community altogether.

When we are first introduced to the Breedloves, it becomes clear that Pecolaôs destiny has been doomed from the start. It is her own mother who first sees her as an ugly being because she herself, manipulated by the racist ideology, believes that white is beautiful and black is ugly. Thus, these beliefs are imposed on Pecola since the moment she is born. Furthermore, she often witnesses her fatherôs violent behaviour and his fights with her mother and she thinks of running away. However, she believes that ñas long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them.ò (Morrison, 1970, p. 45). She contemplates whether if she were beautiful, her parents would change, ñmaybe theyôd say, ôWhy, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustnôt do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.ôò (Morrison, 1970, p. 46).

Pecolaôs self-loathing is a direct result of her parentsô self-loathing. Her mother Pauline has felt unattractive since her childhood because of her limp foot and she blamed her feeling of unworthiness and separateness on the disability. Consequently, she became lost in her fantasies about romantic love and later in film fantasies, too. She became obsessed with physical beauty which was represented by white film stars. Eventually she found beauty in the Fisher house, where she worked as a cleaner. Pecola only witnessed her mother giving love to somebody when she was giving it to a white child. Pauline completely fails as a mother, continuously undermining Pecolaôs self-confidence. Pecolaôs father never knew love either, having been abandoned by both parents soon after he was born. The racism he had to face even during such intimate moment such as the first sexual experience left him ashamed, frightened and angry. Morrison does not defend Chollyôs actions but through the flashback focused on his childhood and adolescence makes us understand him somewhat more. In a twisted way, it is Cholly, who ultimately felt some kind of love for Pecola: ñThe sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then loveò (Morrison, 1970, p. 161). Unfortunately, Cholly did not know how to love and chose the most heinous way to express it. Claudia in her epilogue remarks: ñCholly loved her. Iôm sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But this touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safeò (Morrison, 1970, p. 206).

The last step before Pecolaôs derangement is her visit to Soaphead Church, a local charlatan obsessed with purity and with paedophilic tendencies. He is convinced of his

familyôs superiority due to his ancestors separating themselves from their African roots and ñlightening the family complexion and thinning out the family featuresò (Morrison, 1970, p. 168). Thus, when Pecola visits him, he thinks her wish for blue eyes is completely logical and natural. He wants to help her achieve the purity of a little white girl but he is aware that he cannot do miracles. Instead, he deceives her into thinking she would get blue eyes by tricking her for his own benefit.

After Pecola becomes schizophrenic, the community distance themselves from her even more. Most of them because they view her as a freak, Claudia and Frieda because they feel like they failed her. However, Claudia admits in the end, that they were not compassionate, they were simply polite and well behaved and Pecolaôs madness eventually started boring them.

Pecola viewed her black womanhood as the most shameful thing about herself and that is what kept her from finding her true self. She became the townôs scapegoat, as she was used by everyone who wanted to feel prettier, richer, smarter or more worthy in general.

4.1.3 Claudia MacTeer

Despite the frequent narrator shifts from first person to omniscient, the novel is predominantly narrated by Claudia. The prologue and the epilogue are told from the perspective of the adult Claudia who goes back in time to reminisce about 1941 in Lorain. She reflects on what happened that year to Pecola and on her own experience. The rest of the chapters, apart from those about Cholly, Pauline and Soaphead Church, are narrated in the present tense from a perspective of the nine-year old Claudia. Claudia can be considered a reliable narrator as she tries to present the events in the way they really happened.

Claudia grows up in a rather poor family with her parents and her sister Frieda, who is one year her senior. Throughout the book, her parents are shown as rather loving people when it comes to their daughters. Claudia complains about the way she is treated by them but simultaneously submits evidence that they are very caring. It is hard for Claudia to understand that the tough love Mrs. MacTeer gives her is love nonetheless. To give an example, Claudia expresses discontent and annoyance with her mother when she gets scolded for catching cold. Subsequently, her mother massages her chest with a salve, wraps her in a quilt and gives her syrup. In another passage, she yells at the girls when she thinks they are

ñplaying nastyò but feels remorseful when she finds out they were dealing with Pecolaôs first period. Moreover, Mrs. MacTeer helps Pecola with her problem. Her father protects the girls by throwing out Mr. Henry after he fondles Friedaôs breasts. Claudia remembers all these moments along with the stories from her motherôs songs because they remind her of the nurturing nature of her parents who enabled her to have a relatively happy childhood. In the beginning of the ñWinterò chapter, she describes her fatherôs face with tenderness, juxtaposing his character with the abusive alcoholic Cholly Breedlove. Her good upbringing helps her embrace her blackness and her femininity despite numerous attempts by others to make her feel lesser.

In many ways, Claudia is quite different from Pecola and even Frieda. It is evident from the beginning that she is of a rebellious character. She despises the oppression of black and poor people, often imagining bad things she would do to her richer arrogant friends if she had the chance and courage. She is very passionate, even aggressive. She is shown to get into fights on numerous occasions, however it is usually to defend her friends.

She does not share Pecolaôs obsession with Shirley Temple, on the contrary she despises her. She is jealous of Shirleyôs white privilege because it is the reason why she is the one dancing with the famous black dancer Bojangles, not Claudia. Significantly, her jealousy does not make her want to be like Shirley, it makes her want to fight her and what she represents. She cannot understand what is so beautiful about the white blue-eyed doll, so she dismembers it ñto see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only meò (Morrison, 1970, p. 20). Claudia is aware of the racial oppression. She knows she can destroy the dolls but she is too small to get rid of the general obsession with white beauty alone. She even doubts her worthiness at one point but eventually recognizes the danger of the racist beauty standards and embraces her identity of a black girl, self-loving and comfortable in her own skin.

The novel is a coming-of-age story not only from Pecolaôs perspective but Claudiaôs too. It begins with her and Frieda finding Mr. Henryôs erotic magazines which she is obviously fascinated by as she suggests Frieda they could go look at them. She also witnesses Pecolaôs period and is full of awe because it is the first time she learns about this important milestone in a womanôs life which essentially means passing into womanhood. The process of losing her innocence continues when Maureen and Pecola argue about how

ñdirtyò it is to see oneôs father naked and Claudia feels ashamed for not feeling ashamed about seeing her own father naked. She had never considered it to be wrong and realizes that it is looked upon by societyôs standards as something sexual and therefore wrong. She is further exposed to the world of sexuality when she and her sister find Mr. Henry with prostitutes in their house and later when Frieda is groped by him, which results in him being kicked out of the house by Mr. MacTeer. Claudia is confused, wondering what it means when her mother is afraid that Frieda might be ñruined.ò Her innocence is ultimately lost when she is witnessing Pecolaôs road to insanity. More specifically when she and Frieda plant the marigold seeds in order to save Pecolaôs baby and validate their own worthiness in the process, but they never grow.

Claudia often struggles to understand the behaviour of adults. She is not familiar with the norms and rules the community expects her to follow, which results in conflicts either with other people or herself. Throughout the book, she learns from the situations she finds herself in and accepts these norms. She eventually gives up the revolt and adapts to the life of adults who believe little girls should feel grateful when they are given a white doll or are compared to Greta Garbo. As Claudia reveals, she would later learn to delight in cleanliness just like she would learn to love Shirley Temple, even though she knew ñthe change was adjustment without improvementò (Morrison, 1970, p. 23). Morrison makes a statement of how extremely powerful the racist ideology is when it managed to break even such strong and stubborn person such as Claudia MacTeer (Smith, 2012).

The contrast between Claudia and Pecola is striking. Although they are both young black girls living in poor environment, there is a major difference in their lives, which is revealed to be the key in understanding Pecolaôs tragic ending. Claudia describes her house as old and cold because of the familyôs poverty but it is evident her mother is keen on transforming the house into a proper home. She keeps it clean and safe for her daughters and as a result Claudia creates fond memories of her motherôs singing and cooking. On the other hand, Pecolaôs familyôs flat is described as a broken home full of negative memories of violence and despair. It reflects the ugliness the Breedloves feel inside on the outside. When Pecola thinks of her home, she thinks about her parents fighting, her brother running away and herself wishing to disappear. In conclusion, the feeling of security related to her family home along with the love and support from her family, helps Claudia grow into a proud black woman. In contrast, Pecola has never experienced these feelings and thus, she fabricates this unrealistic fantasy in her head while searching for love.

4.1.4 Frieda MacTeer

Frieda is ten years old at the beginning of the novel, therefore on the verge of adolescence. Her personality is not as fierce and aggressive as her sisterôs, she is rather reserved most of the time. On the other hand, she proves to be quite strong-minded and stubborn as well. Frieda is more courageous than Claudia which seems to be a quality she inherited from her mother. When Pecola is being harassed by a group of boys, Claudia is afraid the boys would notice her and Frieda and start harassing them instead. Frieda, on the other hand, does not hesitate and rushes to Pecolaôs rescue. ñThen Frieda, with set lips and Mamaôs eyes, snatched her coat from her head and threw it on the ground. She ran toward them and brought her books down on Woodroow Cainôs headò (Morrison, 1970, p. 66). She appears to have respect among the boys as they get frightened of her. Moreover, she uses her wit and threatens Woodroow she would expose his secret. However, the boys only leave after Maureen appears as they do not want to fight in front of her.

Claudia explains that she and Frieda were constantly fighting before Pecola joined their household. In spite of that, it is obvious she looks up to her older sister, even describing her as brave. When Frieda gets into the fight with the boys, it encourages Claudia to join the fight as well. Frieda possesses a strong sense of justice. When Pecola is being harassed again by Maureen, Frieda defends her once again.

At the beginning of the novel she gushes over Shirley Templeôs cuteness with Pecola, although she is, similarly to Claudia, bothered by the universal obsession with white beauty. When she meets Maureen Peal, she is jealous of her fancy clothes and all the money her family possesses and she desperately tries to find a flaw on her. She and Claudia find a small victory in discovering Maureenôs dog tooth and the fact that she was born with six fingers on one hand. After Frieda and Claudia get called ugly by Maureen, the girls return the insults but their jealousy starts turning into envy. They are no longer only jealous of Maureenôs possessions, they begin to question whether in order to be loved by everyone like Maureen, they would have to look like Maureen, too. Fortunately, they have not learned the kind of self-hatred the adults feel yet, therefore they are hurt but still in love with themselves. Claudia shows her perceptiveness at the end of this passage, when she remarks: ñAll the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not usò (Morrison, 1970, p. 74).

Frieda proves to be slightly more knowledgeable than Claudia and Pecola throughout the novel. When Pecola gets her period, Frieda is the only one who knows what is happening. She shares all the information with Claudia and Pecola and takes charge in resolving the issue. Frieda resembles her mother with the authority she expresses. Furthermore, she also likes to gossip, similarly to her mother. She gets a lot of what she knows from listening to her mother talking to their neighbours.

Friedaôs coming-of-age moment is represented in the part of the novel where she gets sexually harassed by Mr. Henry. He shows interest in her particularly because he is enamoured by her growing body, specifically her budding breasts. Claudia expresses jealousy over the incident, not because she wants to be touched by Mr. Henry, but because she is the last of the girls to enter womanhood. Friedaôs maturing contrasts with her innocent ignorance when she misunderstands her motherôs comment about Frieda possibly ñbeing ruined.ò She believes it means being fat and as a result, she and Claudia go try to get some whiskey because it might prevent her from getting fat.

In the passage revolving around Mr. Henry touching Frieda, the relationship between the MacTeer girls and their parents is yet again illustrated. The incident is a traumatic experience for Frieda, which she needs to share with somebody. She turns to her parents without any hesitation. Morrison emphasizes the fact that Frieda did not get ñwhippedò by her mother when she learned about the incident to put it in contrast with Pecolaôs story. Friedaôs parents are infuriated and take action immediately, getting rid of the perpetrator. On the other hand, Pecolaôs mother displays no compassion or sympathy for Pecola after she goes through the most traumatic experience of her life, getting raped. Moreover, she is beaten by her. This results in Pecola not bothering to confide to her mother at all when she gets raped for the second time.

4.1.5 Pauline Breedlove

Paulineôs character is closely explored in a chapter dedicated solely to her. The chapter is narrated by an omniscient narrator as the events that happen are beyond Claudiaôs experience. To make the narration more reliable, Morrison chose to interweave it with Paulineôs memories written in a first-person narrative.

In the first half of the novel, Pauline is introduced as a terrible mother whose only pleasures in life are fighting with her husband in their broken home and taking care of her

employerôs white child. She is only referred to as ñMrs. Breedloveò by Pecola but her first name is later revealed as Pauline or ñPollyò when the white girl addresses her. The contrast between her relationship with Pecola and her relationship with the white child is palpable. Furthermore, it can also be compared to Claudia and Frieda calling their mother ñmamaò, suggesting their relationship is much closer and warmer.

However, Morrison never paints her characters as strictly black or white, therefore she provides Paulineôs background story to explain her motives and actions which formed her into her current self. Thus the reader gains slightly more sympathy for her.

Being born as the ninth child of eleven, Pauline felt quite neglected as a little girl and strived for attention. She blamed the feeling of loneliness and unworthiness on her injured foot which made her an outcast in her eyes. The deformity made her feel ugly and lesser and essentially defined her entire life and consequently also Pecolaôs life. Paulineôs conviction about her ugliness kept her isolated from society. As a result she started looking for pleasure elsewhere. Her main focus became arranging and organizing things at home. Her previous delight in housekeeping is once again juxtaposed with the poor state of her unmaintained home that she later built with Cholly. Pauline possesses a great sense of perceiving colours, which is represented in her vivid descriptions of childhood memories. It is also stated that she would miss paints and crayons without knowing what she missed, indicating she had an artistic side to her. This side of her is never explored, though.

The crucial part of Paulineôs story is the discovery of her secret fantasies which she made up in her head as a result of distancing herself from her family and peers. She has romantic dreams about men and physical touch which intensify when she listens to the church choir. ñIn none of her fantasies was she ever aggressive; she was usually idling by the river bank, or gathering barriers in a field when someone appeared, with gentle and penetrating eyes, who ï with no exchange of words ï understood; and before whose glance her foot straightened and her eyes dropped. The someone had no face, no form, no voice, no odor. He was a simple Presence, an all-embracing tenderness with strength and a promise of restò (Morrison, 1970, p. 113). The ñPresenceò in her fantasies leads her to happiness, just like the Lord in the choir song shows the way to the lost and lonely. In this passage, Morrison touches on the sexist ideology that a woman is supposed to stay passive while waiting for a strong man to lead her in life. ñShe had only to lay her head on his chest and he would lead her away to the sea, to the city, to the woods... foreverò (Morrison,

1970, p. 113). This ideology is also the reason why she marries Cholly, whom she idealizes at the beginning.

Once Pauline and Cholly move to Lorain, money, or the lack thereof, become a source of their fights and Chollyôs true violent nature mixed with alcohol starts to show. Morrisonôs writing skills are yet again demonstrated in her description of the process of losing a tooth. Not only does Paulineôs missing front tooth contribute to her self-hatred, but it is also a metaphor for her failing marriage. The tooth is slowly decaying which is not noticeable at first, nor is it uncomfortable, but the roots accustomed to the decay eventually stop holding the tooth until it finally falls out. ñBut even before the little brown speck, there must have been the conditions, the setting that would allow it to exist in the first placeò (Morrison, 1970, p. 116).

In addition, Pauline struggles connecting to other women in town which is where her obsession with physical beauty begins. She experiences humiliation when the other women poke fun at her for her clumsy walk in heels and her curly hair. She is envious of their fancy clothes and makeup in the similar way Claudia and Frieda were jealous of Maureen Peal. The difference being the girls did not succumb to the racist ideology that praised white beauty, Pauline, on the other hand, did.

When Pauline in her loneliness started to go to the cinema, it became fatal for her. She was exposed to the idea of physical beauty and equated it with value. ñShe stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heapò (Morrison, 1970, p. 122). She started basing her opinions on films, and the fake picture of white peopleôs perfect homes quickly increased her disgust in her own. Once, Pauline even tried to look like Jean Harlow, a white Hollywood star, by fixing her hair up in the same way. However, she lost her front tooth and realized that she will never be like Jean Harlow and ñsettled down to just being uglyò (Morrison, 1970, p. 123).

The beauty standards she adapted did not apply to her daughter who she imagined would look differently. Paulineôs first thought looking upon Pecola was ñshe was ugly.ò Although she is quite kind and loving during her pregnancy and even makes a promise to love the baby no matter her appearance, ultimately she cannot look past Pecolaôs black ñugliness.ò Her judgement keeps her from loving the baby which eventually destroys Pecolaôs life.

Pauline finally finds her life purpose in church as well as in serving the white family. The Fisher household fulfils all her needs ï not only does she get to keep things organized and neat but she also works in a house similar to those in her favourite films. In finally finding her identity, she distances herself from her children completely and prefers taking care of the pretty white girl at work.

The parallel between Pauline and Pecola is obvious. Driven by self-hatred, they both create fantasies about things they can never get and both get caught up in those fantasies. Pecola believes to have blue eyes and Pauline believes to have become a lady of a luxurious house and a mother to a beautiful white girl.

4.2 Sula

Sula was published in 1973 as Toni Morrisonôs second novel. Although *The Bluest Eye* did not achieve an immediate success at the time of its publication, Morrison got in the centre of literary public sphere, started writing reviews for *New York Times* and published comments concerning black women cultural issues (Furman, 2014). By the time *Sula* came out, Morrison has already become an acknowledged author. Therefore, her second novel was commercially very well-received and critically acclaimed. It was nominated for the National Book Award and selected for Oprahôs Book Club in 2002 (Borge, Frank, 2018).

In *Sula*, Morrison decided to explore a relationship between two women who grow up in the same place but their upbringing is rather different. She emphasizes the binary thinking of people which is present throughout the novel in themes, characters and even in the background setting. One of these binary opposites are evil and good, and Morrison explores the approach of the black community to the so-called evil: ñIn *Sula*, the people are like the people I have always known who may or may not be superstitious, but they look at the world differently. Their cosmology is a little bit different. Their relationship to evil is what preoccupied me most throughout the book. How they see it. What they do with itò (Morrison, 1994, p. 62). In her 1979 interview with Betty Jean Parker, she clarifies how black people in general view evil. According to Morrison, African-Americans accept evil as a natural thing they cannot eradicate but they can avoid it or try to defend themselves from it. Overall, though, they agree it has its place in the universe. Morrison remarks that Nel and Sula are the representatives of the so-called good and the so-called evil, but highlights the fact that it is difficult to tell which is which (Morrison, 1994, p. 62).

Sula is a fine example of Morrisonôs ability to portray the complexity of human character. She refuses to portray the characters as strictly good or bad. On the contrary, she proves that the resemblance between good and evil makes it often difficult to distinguish the two. Thus, we cannot simply tell who the protagonist and the antagonist of the novel are.

4.2.1 Summary

Sula is told by a third person omniscient narrator who grants the readers access to the mind of every important character in the novel. Not only does the narrator help the readers understand motivations of the characters but also tells the story without bias, letting the readers form opinions on their own.

The story takes place between 1919 and 1965 (thus at the time of segregation) in a placed called The Bottom. The Bottom is a part of the city of Medallion inhabited predominantly by black people. The name of the place is ironic as it is situated in the hills. The community was built there after a black slave was tricked by his master who promised to give him a piece of the bottom land if he performed some difficult chores for him. Not willing to give him the quality valley land, he told the slave the land in the hills is the bottom land as it is the bottom of heaven and therefore better. Eventually even the Bottom got taken by white people who decided to build a golf course there.

The first person introduced in the novel is Shadrack, a WWI veteran who is mentally scarred by the war and his obsessive thoughts about death lead him to found a National Suicide Day. On this day, people can either kill themselves or one another.

Then the main characters Nel and Sula are introduced. Nel is raised by a conservative mother Helene who urges a conventional life upon Nel. When they travel to visit Nelôs dying former prostitute grandmother, they have to face racial discrimination. Moreover, Helene expresses gratitude for being separated from her shameful past, which makes Nel question her life and she decides to be ñwonderful.ò She rebels by befriending Sula. Sula lives in a boarding house with her mother Hannah and her grandmother Eva who are known for their loose manners.

One day, Evaôs son Plum returns from war. Marked by the horrors of the war, he becomes a drug addict. Eva cannot bear the look of him and sets him on fire to release him from his empty life. Soon after the incident Sula and Nel unintentionally cause a death of a

young boy called Chicken Little when Sula swings him into the water and he drowns. The girls keep the accident a secret between the two of them. Only a few years later, another death occurs. This time it is Hannah who burns to death after she catches on fire in the yard. Eva attempts to save her, Sula, on the other hand, watches but does nothing.

Nel gets married to Jude and Sula leaves the Bottom to visit different cities and attend college. After Sula returns ten years later, she places Eva in a nursing home and seduces Nelôs husband. As a result, their friendship is ruined and Sula becomes a pariah of the community. She gets romantically involved with a man called Ajax who is not ready to commit to her, so he leaves. Sula becomes ill which brings her and Nel together again. However, they argue again, Nel leaves and Sula dies alone.

The next National Suicide Day, Shadrack is joined by a large number of people for his annual march. They march towards the tunnel that white people are building at the Bottom but black people are forbid to work on. They start to destroy the tunnel out of anger and the tunnel collapses on them, killing them all.

The story ends in 1965 with Sula visiting the dying Eva in a hospital. She reflects on the accident with Chicken Little, realizing she felt pleasure in watching him drown and cries over Sula.

4.2.2 Sula Peace

Although they are rather different characters, Sula and Pecola Breedlove resemble to a degree. Firstly, they are both coming of age, the novels start with them being young girls and transitioning into women. Secondly, both their lives are influenced by the lack of their mothersô affection which results in them feeling unloved and essentially also shapes their future identities. Finally, Sula and Pecola become the communityôs scapegoats. The people separate themselves from them but at the same time use them both to make themselves feel better.

Since her introduction, it has been apparent that Sula is a strong, courageous and determined woman. When Nel had to change her route home to a more complicated one because of white bullies who kept harassing her, Sula intervened by cutting off the tip of her own finger in front of them as a threat that it would be them who she would cut next time. She also seems to lack empathy. She does not experience shock when witnessing horrifying incidents. Quite the contrary, she feels fascinated by the sight of her mother

burning to death. She is not too devastated by Chicken Littleôs death either, using it more as an opportunity to deepen her friendship with Nel.

Sula is described as an unpredictable person, who ñcould hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutesò (Morrison, 1973, p. 53). In addition, she is unusually independent for her time. In the first half of the twentieth century, women were expected to live a conventional life, taking on the role of the matriarch in the family. Obedient wives and mothers were viewed as role models for young girls, while independent, sexually liberated women were frowned upon. Sulaôs independence begins with overhearing her mother saying she does not like her. It leads to Sula detaching herself from Hannah and essentially everyone else as well. Her only constant is Nel, in whom she finds her soul mate and who completes her in a way. However, Sulaôs independence is closely related to her loneliness.

Sulaôs feeling of loneliness is rather ironic as she grew up in a house full of people, including her mother and her grandmother. However, she had always had to rely only on herself due to her absent father and her promiscuous mother. She had no opportunity to connect with any of her motherôs lovers as they always only stayed for one night. Sula finally finds the connection she was missing with her family with Nel. She gets attached to her significantly, almost as if they became one person. ñShe had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thingò (Morrison, 1973, p. 119). When Nel gets married, Sula feeling possessive of her feels betrayed to an extent and her loneliness intensifies. The only other case of her getting attached to another person is when she gets involved with Ajax. Nevertheless, it also ends in disappointment for Sula when afraid of commitment, he decides to leave her.

Sulaôs fear of being alone is put in contrast with her longing for freedom and her inability or rather reluctance to keep a man. Despite her distance from her family, she is largely influenced by both, her mother Hannah and her grandmother Eva. She learns from their unconcealed sexual encounters that sex might be enjoyable but men are essentially dispensable. Sula comes to a conclusion that in order to create her own identity, she does not need anyone else but herself. After her return to the Bottom, she starts having intimate relations with numerous men without a premise to commit to one. Her personal empowerment naturally clashes with the communityôs expectations and Sula becomes their target. She is labelled evil and blamed for everything wrong that happens in the Bottom: ñShe was pariah, then, and knew it. Knew that they despised her and believed that they framed their

hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with menò (Morrison, 1973, p. 122). In her final conversation with Nel, Sula reveals that living as an independent woman was worthy because even if she felt loneliness, ñmy lonely was mine. Now your lonely is somebody elseôs. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ainôt that something? A secondhand lonelyò (Morrison, 1973, p. 143). Moreover, Sula expresses the thought that the fate of every African-American woman is ultimately the same. They are all eventually going to die, what is important is the way they decide to live before it happens.

On the other hand, as commitment-free as Sula desires to be, there is a part of her that secretly enjoys the conventions and the social norms. It is first apparent when she is said to enjoy sitting in Nelôs perfectly neat house on a red-velvet sofa for a long period of time. Secondly, it is present in the passage where she realized how deep her connection with Ajax is and ñbegan to discover what possession wasò (Morrison, 1973, p. 131). Sula even goes as far as putting a ribbon in her hair, cleaning Ajaxôs house, making his bed and cooking dinner for him. She simply goes against everything she stands for but she is eventually let down as this time it is Ajax who refuses to commit. She feels completely empty after he leaves, overwhelmed with a thought that she will never experience anything new again. Consequently, drowning in sorrow she falls ill and eventually dies.

Morrison truly focuses on the femininity aspect of the characters in *Sula*. The male characters are portrayed as either emasculated by the racist ideology and the war, or absent and therefore replaced by women as the head of the family. However, their opinions are still valued over those of black women as it is them who accuse Sula of sleeping with white men and essentially make her an outcast. Patricia Hill Collins (2000, p. 162) explains that black women who got voluntarily involved with white men were viewed as either traitors of their own race or prostitutes who only use white men for money. According to Morrison, it was unforgivable behaviour in the eyes of the community, even though they had no evidence that it actually happened. Sula basically became a scapegoat of the black men of the Bottom who saw her as an opportunity to gain back their dominance and masculinity which was stolen from them by the white supremacists. Moreover, Morrison makes a point about black women being at the bottom of the social hierarchy as they obediently follow their men. This phenomenon is represented in the different approach to Hannah and Sula by the community. Hannah pampers the men and therefore she is respected by them and even by their wives. When she burned to death, they ñwept for her burned hair and wrinkled breasts as though they themselves had been her loversò (Morrison, 1973, 77). Sula, on

the other hand, is ñtrying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallowò (Morrison, 1973, p. 115). The men obviously find her behaviour repulsive and undesirable and their opinion is immediately adapted by the women as well.

4.2.3 Nel Wright

Nel is introduced as a seeming opposite to Sula. The contrast is apparent even in their physical appearance. Nel is described as a light-skinned plain girl with no particular distinguishable features. Sula is a dark-skinned girl with heavy dark eyes and a very unique birthmark on her eyelid.

Nelôs upbringing differs significantly from Sulaôs. Her life has been pre-planned since the day she was born. She is polite and obedient as a result of her mother's manipulation. She grows up in an utterly neat and orderly house where she feels uncomfortable. The only family she is contact with are her mother Helene and her father, who is frequently absent due to his job as a cook on a ship. Nel is being kept far from her grandmother because Helene is ashamed of her past. For this reason, she also prevented Nel from learning Creole, the language her grandmother speaks.

Two crucial events happen in Nel's life which influence her way of thinking in terms of creating her identity. The first important event that occurs is Nelôs witnessing her mother being humiliated because of the colour of her skin. Helene and Nel are visiting Heleneôs dying grandmother and on their way, Helene is forced to urinate in the field in view of all the white passengers simply due to the fact that there are no toilets for coloured people on the train. Despite having experienced racism in the form of school bullies, this is Nel's first real experience with the destructive power of the white supremacy. Moreover, her mother demeans herself in front of a white conductor making Nel question her actual strength and also the extent to which she can really control all the things around her. Secondly, she sees how ashamed Helene is of her own mother for her past of a prostitute when they meet her at Nelôs dying grandmotherôs house. She comes to a conclusion that the reason for her motherôs obsession with propriety is her effort to erase her past. From this moment, she is determined to make her own future independent of her mother: ñI'm me. Not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Meñ (Morrison, 1974, p. 28). She feels the power building up inside of her and at this moment, she decides that she wants to be ñwonderfulò.

She befriends Sula to rebel against her mother. For Helene, Sula represents

everything she despises in the world. Nel gains a feeling of freedom and individuality with Sula and their friendship is a way for her to escape her conservative mother. Prior to meeting Sula, Nel was forced by her mother to use the hot comb for her hair and a clothespin on her nose to look prettier. After she and Sula became friends, Nel stopped using the clothespin Ăand although there was still the hateful hot comb to suffer through each Saturday evening, its consequences ï smooth hair ï no longer interested herñ (Morrison, 1973, p. 55). Nel and Sula develop an extremely strong bond rooted in their contrasting personalities, which, coming together, create a unity.

The girls begin to explore their sexuality together as well. They frequently think about the boys from the neighbourhood and being aware of their adolescent femininity, they are delighted when Ajax calls them ñpig meatò. Both of them dream about men but their dreams differ significantly. Similarly to Paulineôs dream in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison points out the sexist ideology about a passive woman waiting for a knight in shining armour via Nelôs character as well. In Nelôs dream, she ñfell easily into a picture of herself lying on the flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery princeò (Morrison, 1973, p. 51). At the same time Morrison emphasizes Sulaôs feminist views as she is galloping on a horse, equal to the man she dreams about. Their respective dreams are reflective of their personalities and also foreshadow their future. Their loss of innocence can further be seen in a game they play by the river, which is evidently of a sexual character. They play with twigs, peeling their bark off until they were ñstripped to a smooth, creamy innocenceò (Morrison, 1973, p. 58) and digging deep holes with them rhythmically, which they then fill with things they found on the ground, finally covering the holes with dirt.

Their innocence is ultimately lost when they participate in Chicken Littleôs death. This is only one of many examples of Morrison proving the ambiguity of a human character. Nel, who is generally considered ñthe good oneò out of the two, manifests her darker side. She is the one who teases Chicken Little, while Sula attempts to protect him. This event parallels Nelôs earlier experience with the white Irish boys who kept harassing her until Sula stepped in. Similarly to the Irish boys venting their frustration of poor immigrants on the weaker Nel, she chooses the weaker Chicken Little as her target. In addition, Chicken Littleôs death leaves her completely calm and self-composed. She does not appear to be much affected by his death at all. Her only concern seems to be whether they have been seen by anyone during the incident. Nel is proud of her controlled

behaviour when Sula breaks down after accidentally causing Chicken Littleôs death. However, when she reflects on the incident many years later, she realizes that what she actually felt while watching him drown was joy. ñWhy didnôt I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?ò (Morrison, 1973, p. 170).

In spite of Nelôs determination to become her own individual person, she eventually submits to the conventions and settles in Medallion with her new husband Jude. She proceeds to live her life according to her motherôs wishes. This particular issue can be juxtaposed with Claudia MacTeer from *The Bluest Eye*, who was a rebel fighting the oppression only to end up fulfilling other peopleôs expectations. However, Jude mostly marries Nel to prove his manliness. He works as a waiter which is a womanôs job according to him. He tries to get a ñmanlierò job working on the New Road but is rejected due to his black colour. He feels humiliated but also determined to take on a manôs role somewhere else. He chooses Nel because she is passive enough to make him feel like he is in charge of everything. ñWith her, he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessityò (Morrison, 1973, p. 83). By agreeing to marry Jude, Nel essentially fulfils the dream she had as a young girl.

Despite devoting her life to Jude, Nel recognizes that he cannot give her as much joy as Sula. She settles in ordinariness, has children and takes care of her husband. However, when Sula returns to town after ten years, she feels like an important part of herself returned. As if she had a ñcataract removedò (Morrison, 1973, p. 90). In her description of her relationship with Sula, she explains how clever and raunchy Sula made her feel, how they shared perceptions of things and how much she made her laugh. She even mentions her love for Jude growing stronger as a result of Sulaôs return. Unlike other girls, Sula and Nel never quarrelled over boys and every time one of them got a compliment, it was as if both of them did. ñTalking to Sula had always been a conversation with herselfò (Morrison, 1973, p. 95). It is apparent both of them think of themselves as a unity. This becomes an issue when Sula sleeps with Jude not taking Nelôs feelings into consideration. She assumes Nel would be fine with it as they always shared perceptions. Sula is disappointed to find out Nel has become one of *them*. The ñme-nessò which Nel found at the beginning and which brought her and Sula initially together was gone.

Nelôs potential to become ñwonderfulò got eventually lost in her conviction that she is ñthe good oneò. She was too afraid to step outside the stereotype of an obedient black mother and wife and for that she was accepted by the community but separated from her

best friend who simply refused to succumb to the conventions. However, she is well aware of the sexism which black women had to endure. When Sula asks her ñWhy canôt I have it all?ò Nelôs answer is ñYou a woman and a colored woman at that. You canôt act like a man. You canôt be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you donôtò (Morrison, 1973, p. 142).

4.2.4 Eva Peace

Eva is the most dominant figure in the Peace household. As the matriarch of the family, she looks after and feels responsible for all the people who live in her boarding house. She is well-respected among the residents. Her place on top is emphasized by the fact that she occupies the highest floor of the house and also that all the residents look up to her despite physically towering over her. She also directs and controls all of their lives, shaping them into whoever and whatever she wants. When three abandoned children appear in her house, she takes them in and names all three of them Dewey. Although looking substantially different, they start blending into one inseparable unit under Evaôs influence until they are indistinguishable by everyone. Their individual personalities are essentially erased. Even the name Dewey loses its meaning. It simply becomes a way to refer to one of the boys ï a dewey.

Similarly to other Peace women, Eva is also often surrounded by men. She craves their attention but in contrast to Hannah, she never gets too intimate with them. She does not feel the need to secure a husband as she simply loves ñmaleness for its own sakeò (Morrison, 1973, p. 41). She flirts with men and challenges them, giving them feeling of manliness, and they keep her entertained in return. She would listen to them ñfeeling no obligation to agreeò (Morrison, 1973, p. 42). Evaôs dominant behaviour stands in contrast to the other women of Medallion who had no opinion of themselves and simply agreed with everything their husbands declared.

Eva is an interesting character especially in terms of her maternal side. Abandoned by her husband and living in utter poverty, she is willing to sacrifice everything for her three children. She even cuts her own leg off in order to collect insurance money. This act can be compared to Sula chopping off the tip of her finger for Nel, suggesting the similarity between her and Eva in terms of making sacrifices for the people closest to them. Similarly to Sula, Eva does not receive the gratitude she expects. Hannah does not see Evaôs radical act as a proof of her maternal love. On the contrary, she questions whether Eva ever

loved her and her siblings. The question irritates Eva who believes to have done everything she could have to provide her children with food, accommodation and health care, for this is how she demonstrates her love. It is evident there is no actual bond developed between the mother and the daughter. Hannah sees Eva as someone who helped her survive but showed little to no affection to her. This is obviously a direct result of their eighteen month long separation at the time Hannah was a child. Eva temporarily abandoned her children in order to secure them, breaking the motherly bond.

Evaôs determination to help her children under any circumstances is further noticeable in another one of her radical acts, which is setting her own son on fire. The youngest of her children Plum has always been Evaôs favourite. She hoped to bequeath all her possessions to him and even at his adult age, she kept calling him ñmy baby.ò However, when Plum returned from the war, he started using drugs and once he returned to Medallion, he was fully addicted. According to Eva, he turned from a grown-up man to a little baby again, ñbeing helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the timeò (Morrison, 1973, p. 71). Eva felt like he wanted to crawl back into her womb but she had no place for him there. Not being able to bear the sight of her wreck of a son, she decided to burn him alive to release him from his pain and more importantly to enable him to leave the world as a man. As James and Nye (1997, p. 41) point out, a similar occurrence happens when Hannah accidentally catches on fire and Eva hurts herself while coming to her rescue. They are both transported to the hospital in one ambulance. While Eva is wide awake, Hannah dies in the ambulance. ñOr so they said.ò (Morrison, 1973, p. 77). This sentence suggests that Eva, realizing Hannah would be mutilated for life, once again killed her child in order to release her from a life of misery.

Eva plays a crucial role in shaping Sula and Nelôs characters as well. Sula refuses to be controlled by Eva, which is one of the reasons why she does nothing to help her when Hannah is dying by fire. When Sula returns to Medallion, their first encounter in years is full of hostility. Their similar personalities of dominant women who love perhaps too intensely cause a conflict. Sula confronts Eva about Plumôs death and Eva accuses Sula of watching Hannah die. They are both aware of what the other one is capable of which evokes fear in both. Eva begins locking her bedroom door in fear of getting burned by Sula and Sula commits Eva to a nursing home out of the same fear. In the Medallion communityôs perspective the latter is viewed as unacceptable and they condemn Sula completely.

Years after Sulaôs death, Nel visits Eva in the hospital. Despite her dementia, Eva remembers the accident with Chicken Little and helps Nel acknowledge her real involvement in his death. Eva remarks that Nel and Sula are the same and Nel reflects on her relationship with Sula. She realizes that her judgement of her was unfair and it is Sula she actually misses, not Jude.

4.3 Beloved

Morrisonôs fifth novel *Beloved* (1987) is also her best-recognized book due to its cultural importance. Morrison exposes the atrocity, cruelty and injustice of slavery in a powerful and compelling way, giving voice to the victims of this inhuman institution, but also maintaining awareness of this particular issue. The dedication in *Beloved* which says ñSixty Million and moreò refers to the number of victims of slavery in America.

The overall positive feedback resulted in Morrisonôs nomination for National Book Award. A wave of indignation rose among other black authors when Morrison did not win. Forty-eight black writers and critics, including Maya Angelou or Amiri Baraka, published a statement in *New York Times* deploring the fact that a black author was yet again overlooked by the National Book Awards jury. Simultaneously they praised Morrisonôs literary work and labelled *Beloved* ñthe most recent gift to our community, our country, our conscienceò (New York Times, 1988).

Morrison was finally acknowledged in April 1988 when she was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. Whether the statement published in *New York Times* helped her case is debatable. Nevertheless, Morrison was further recognized in 1993 by the Swedish Academy which awarded her with Nobel Prize and thus proved her undeniable literary talent and value. Undoubtedly, it was *Beloved* which contributed to her success with the Swedish Academy.

Morrison first came across Margaret Garnerôs story when she was working as an editor at Random House. The newspaper report from 1855 informed about a slave who escaped from a plantation in Kentucky to take refuge in her mother-in-lawôs home in Cincinnati. After being caught, she attempted to kill all her children to save them from life as slaves but only managed to kill one of them before she was stopped. Even after the incident, she was convinced of the rightness of her actions. Morrisonôs intention was not to write a historical novel about slavery as much as focus on the particular woman who was

so deeply affected by it and her personal feelings (JaŚab, *Beloved* afterword, 1987, p. 281, 282).

Beloved was also adapted into a 1998 film directed by Jonathan Demme. The main character Sethe was portrayed by Oprah Winfrey while Danny Glover played Paul D. However, the film did not achieve as much success as Morrisonôs novel.

4.3.1 Summary

The narrative style in *Beloved* is rather complex. The novel is partially told in the third person omniscient point of view but for the most part the narration switches to a third person limited perspective. Thus the story is told from numerous charactersô points of view and the reader gets insight into each of the characters, major and minor. In the second part of the novel, there are three chapters narrated in the first person from the perspective of Sethe, Beloved and Denver. In addition, Morrison uses a non-chronological narration. She switches back and forth between the present and the past via flashbacks and stories. The present and the past are tightly connected in the novel and often blend into each other.

The story begins in Cincinnati in 1873. Sethe lives with her daughter Denver in a house which appears to be haunted by the ghost of Setheôs dead baby. They are the only two people left in the house after Setheôs two sons were driven out of there by the para-normal force, and her mother-in-law Baby Suggs died eight years ago.

One day, Paul D, a former slave who worked at the same plantation as Sethe, arrives. He and Sethe reminisce about their past at the Sweet Home plantation and Seth allows him to move in. They become a couple and Paul D begins making changes in the household. He forces the ghost away and makes Denver leave the house for the first time in years.

Soon after, a mysterious woman appears in front of their house. She does not know where she came from but claims to be called Beloved. Sethe feels drawn to her and lets her move in the house with them. Everyone believes Beloved to be Setheôs dead daughter. Denver in particular grows attached to her. At the same time, Beloved becomes obsessed with Sethe. Paul D is irritated with Beloved but she controls him by seduction. Paul D eventually moves out but not until he learns new information about Setheôs past.

After Sweet Homeôs relatively benevolent owner Mr. Garner died, the plantation fell into care of a cruel man called schoolteacher. Sethe was forced to endure terrible

treatment so she decided to escape. However, the master found her and attempted to reclaim her and her children. Sethe grabbed all of them and ran into a tool shed. Rather than turning them in, she tried to kill all the children with a saw, but only succeeded in killing her oldest daughter.

With Paul Dôs departure, Beloved grows even more demanding. She is manipulative, clingy and borderline abusive. However, Sethe is eager to satisfy all of her needs. She spoils and coddles her out of guilt which Beloved uses to her advantage. It goes as far as Sethe getting fired from her job. Soon there is no food in the house and Denver begins to get worried about her mother. She gets the courage to leave the house and seeks help from her former teacher Lady Jones.

The whole community is willing to help Denver and Sethe. They provide them with food and help Denver to get a job. Eventually, the women of the town unite to exorcise Beloved out of the house. When they arrive, they find Sethe and Beloved who is now satisfied and pregnant on the porch. At the same time, Denverôs new white employer stops by to pick her up. The delirious Sethe mistakes him for schoolteacher who came to reclaim her children and attacks him. The women pacify her and Beloved disappears for good.

The novel ends with Paul D returning and pledging his love for Sethe. Meanwhile Denver becomes a full-fledged member of the community.

4.3.2 Sethe

Sethe is the protagonist of the novel around whom the entire plot revolves. Setheôs life is completely defined by slavery. She was born to a slave who she remembers very little of and she herself was sold to the slaveholder Mr. Garner when she was only thirteen. Even after finally reaching freedom, she is haunted by painful memories, unable to live an ordinary life. She tries to suppress the memories but they are brought back by Paul Dôs arrival. In *Beloved*, Morrison focuses on what it meant to be a black woman at the time of slavery in America, specifically a black mother.

Motherhood is a crucial theme in this novel, especially in relation to the character of Sethe. The intense love she gives to her children is a result of the lack of love she experienced as a child. Sethe and her mother had no opportunity to develop a bond. Setheôs mother worked in a rice field from dawn till dusk and Sethe was looked after by another woman. It is also emphasized Sethe was not nursed by her mother but by a stranger. Nurs-

ing is an important issue throughout the novel, it is described as an essential part of the mother-child relationship. Setheôs only memory of her mother is the brief moment behind the smokehouse where her mother showed her a burnt mark on her skin to identify her body in case her face is unrecognizable. She also remembers being pulled away from her dead motherôs body by a woman called Nan as she was searching for the mark. Setheôs mother was a slave repeatedly raped by white men who impregnated her numerous times. She threw away all of the babies except Sethe because her father was the only black man she was with and the only one who she ñput her arms aroundò (Morrison, 1987, p. 62). It is stated that Sethe was not impressed when she learned this about her mother from Nan, not realizing the physical and emotional suffering her mother had to endure. The adult Sethe, however, feels anger, most likely because she views the story from a different perspective of a mother. Her mother saved her over the numerous other babies but the detachment caused by slavery resulted in Sethe barely remembering her. Moreover, Setheôs motherôs unfortunate numerous pregnancies by rape are juxtaposed with Setheôs ñamazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that ósomebodyô son who had fathered every one of her childrenò (Morrison, 1987, p. 23). Morrison emphasizes the fact that nurturing was something close to luxury for a black mother bound by slavery. They were not even allowed to do such basic things as breast feeding their own children.

The non-existent relationship with her mother prompts Sethe to approach motherhood in the opposite way. She becomes absolutely devoted to her children. After they leave for Cincinnati, she refuses to abandon them by staying behind and risks her life trying to escape. Her devotion is hard to comprehend by others. Baby Suggs would not love her younger children because she knew they would be taken away eventually and therefore it was not worth it. Paul D remarks that ñfor a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to loveò (Morrison, 1987, p. 45). However, for Sethe, her children are a part of herself without which she feels incomplete. She considers nursing the most vital part of creating a connection with her children. As a slave, she possesses nothing, including freedom, so milk is the only thing she can give to her children. As a result, she believes schoolteacher stealing her milk to be more devastating violation than being brutally beaten and raped by his nephews while pregnant.

The idea of letting her children live in slavery is so inconceivable to her that she rather decides to kill them all to save them from that life. ñ... anybody white could take

your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldnôt like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldnôt think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her ownñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 251). Setheôs horrifying act is not dissimilar from Eva Peaceôs proof of her intense love. They both end up killing their children in order to release them from a worthless life on Earth. Similarly to Eva, Sethe is also judged by others for it but feels to have made the right choice. The moral ambiguity created by Morrison makes the reader question who to sympathize with. The community and Paul Dôs response to Setheôs infanticide seems understandable. On the other hand, given the circumstances of the event, it is easy to understand Setheôs motive as well. Sethe is punished by having to spend the following eighteen years in solitude. She also has to witness Baby Suggs and Denver suffering from the consequences of her crime. The guilt building inside her starts eventually consuming her, personified in the character of Beloved.

Sethe turns all of her attention to Beloved, desperately trying to make her understand the reason behind her death. She is pleading for forgiveness, ñcounting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. Give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Belovedôs tearsò (Morrison, 1987, p. 242). It is not enough for Beloved, she demands more and more until Sethe stops caring about anything else including Denver and herself. On the other hand, Belovedôs parasitic character eventually helps Sethe to cope with her past she was trying to suppress so hard at the beginning. Setheôs determination to satisfy all Belovedôs needs forces her to answer Belovedôs constant personal questions. Sethe has no choice but to finally deal with the past which came back to haunt her. At the end, she learns to forgive herself with the help from Paul D and instead of being stuck in the past, she begins to live in the present. ñSethe, me and you, we got more yesterday that anybody. We need some kind of tomorrowò (Morrison, 1987, p. 273).

Morrison plays with the concept of rememory. The word is used several times throughout the book. According to Rushdyôs (2003, p. 7) explanation, rememory is a memory which survives at the place where the individual experience occurred. The experience that one person had can be shared by another person at another time. Thus it is a way for people to share each otherôs prior experiences. In other words, Morrison makes a point about the past blending with the present. In *Beloved*, Sethe explains the concept to Denver

like this: ñSomeday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think itôs you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. Itôs when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. Itôs never going away. Even if the whole farmð every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and whatôs more, if you go thereð you who never was thereð if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for youò (Morrison, 1987, p. 36). Deeply traumatized by the memories of her infanticide, Sethe suppresses them and protects Denver from getting to them by never talking about the incident. She is certain the experience she had at the place are still very much present there and had Denver ever came to the place, she would be forced to relive the whole event.

In truth, Sethe can try to hide her memories in the back of her mind but the cluster of scars resembling a chokecherry tree on her back are a constant reminder of the burden she has to carry. The tree is a symbol of the physical suffering of black men and women during slavery. For Sethe in particular, the scars serve as a reminder of schoolteacherôs cruel treatment of her. The moment she got the scars she was quite literary beaten like an animal, completely stripped of humanity by the white master. Moreover, Sethe associates trees with the numerous dead bodies of slaves lifelessly hanging from them. However, there is irony to it as she describes the trees they are hanging from as ñthe most beautiful sycamores in the worldñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 6). The natural beauty of the Sweet Home plantation is juxtaposed with the atrocities that were happening there.

In comparison to *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, *Beloved* is richer in number of white characters. By including interactions between white and black people, Morrison paints a picture of the social hierarchy at the time. The passage where Sethe overhears schoolteacher comparing her to an animal represents the general dehumanization of African-Americans by white people. Schoolteacherôs conviction that Sethe is nothing but a breeder was further proven by him violently taking her milk as if he was milking a cow. Sethe was not viewed as a human therefore her feelings were never taken into consideration by him. Morrison also explores a different kind of a slaveholder. Mr. Garner seems benevolent, making his slave feel like men, allowing them to suggest improvements for the plantation, to choose a wife and a horse, handle a gun etc. His approach seems much more human than schoolteacherôs. Regardless, he is still a slaveholder who benefits from the institution and his pride in calling his slaves ñmenò is more rooted in hypocrisy as his true intention is to

prove his own masculinity. His wife shows her superiority over Sethe when Sethe asks her about a wedding and Mrs. Garner laughs at her in a condescending way. She also insists on calling Baby Suggs ñJennyò, the name written on her sale ticket. Mrs. Garner presents herself as a good woman as far as her treatment of slaves is concerned. Nevertheless she turns to her cruel brother-in-law to manage the farm after her husbandôs death because she does not want to be the only white person there. The Bodwin siblings are abolitionists and therefore viewed as ñthe good whites.ò Their intentions are inherently good but they hold power over the black people in town which was given to them as a result of their white privilege. Contrary to the black people, they own homes as well as jobs, meaning the African-Americans are dependent on them. In addition, their alliance with black people is limited as proven by the racist stereotypical figurine displayed in their house or Mr. Bodwin calling the abolitionist movement ñthe good years.ò Finally, a white girl called Amy is introduced. The position of an African-American woman in society is nicely depicted in her interaction with Sethe. Although Amy is a poor girl previously mistreated by other white people just like Sethe, she is clearly aware of her superior position of a white woman and especially of her freedom: ñI got more business here ôn you got. They catch you they cut your head off. Ainôt nobody after me but I know somebody after youò (Morrison, 1987, p. 78). Robinson and Fulkerson (2016) also point out the fact that although being tormented, Amy was never treated as an animal or forced to breed children in contrast to Sethe.

4.3.3 Denver

After Setheôs sons Buglar and Howard were driven out of the house by the supernatural force several years earlier, the eighteen year-old Denver is the only child left. She is portrayed as an intelligent and strong-minded young lady but the isolation she was forced to live in because of her mother caused she emotionally appears much younger than she is. She feels lonely as a result of being abandoned by her brothers and her grandmother and completely avoided by her peers. The only companions she has are her mother and the ghost of her dead sister. Her fixation on her mother who calls her a ñcharmed childò results in a childish and self-centred behaviour. She is quite rude to Paul D when he first appears at their house because the conversation shifts from her to his and Setheôs common past at Sweet Home. There is only one story from her motherôs past she enjoys and it is that of her birth. She despises listening to Setheôs past where Denver does not exist yet. Denver never leaves the house to explore the life outside of it. Instead she is trapped in and haunted by

Setheôs past just like her mother. Her potential is lost in the solitude she endures and her identity is shaped by Sethe and her past experience until Belovedôs arrival.

Denver feels connected to the ghost of her sister from the beginning. Although acknowledging it is the reason behind people avoiding their house, she enjoys its presence. Despite everyone having a bad feeling about the haunted house, calling it spiteful and evil, Denver finds pleasure in its mystical element. She had eventually ñtaught herself to take pride in the condemnation Negroes heaped on themñ (Morrison, 1987, p.37). Her connection to the ghost is amplified by the fact that she was breastfed by Sethe immediately after Sethe killed her sister, swallowing her blood along with the milk. After Beloved arrives in a form of a young woman, Denver is no longer the only one who has developed a connection to her. On the contrary, now she has to share her with Sethe. Denver initially feels very protective of Beloved. As attached as Denver is to her mother, she also confesses to be afraid of her: ñI love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, Iôm scared of her because of itñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 205). Consequently she promises to protect Beloved from Sethe and warns her not to love her too much. Denverôs obsession with Beloved perhaps also lies in the absence of her father she never knew. In the beginning she expresses annoyance with Paul D when he starts talking about her father Halle. It is because in her eyes, his absence belonged to Baby Suggs, Sethe and Paul D, but as she never got to know him, ñher own fatherôs absence was not *hers*ò (Morrison, 1987, p. 13). In contrast, ñwhatever her power and however she used it, Beloved was *hers*ò (Morrison, 1987, p. 104). Denverôs feeling of having something on her own overshadows her love for Sethe so much she is ready to choose Beloved over her. Thus when she witnesses Beloved choking Sethe in the woods, she hesitates before interfering. She later confronts Beloved but in fear of losing her, she makes a decision to forget about it.

The situation Denver lives in feels ironic. Her mother was so desperately trying to save her from life in slavery but the isolation and loneliness related to Setheôs memories of it made her feel somewhat enslaved. The mental enslavement by her motherôs haunting past as well as her dead sisterôs spirit caused Denver deflected the focus off her own experiences onto Setheôs. However, with Belovedôs arrival, she starts to recall her own memories. She reminisces about the time she used to take lessons from Lady Jones as a child. As she remembers, ñshe was seven, and those two hours in the afternoon were precious to herò (Morrison, 1987, 102). This is perhaps the last time Denver was truly happy.

Besides other things, the passage suggests the academic potential she has. She is excited to learn new things from Lady Jones, to expand her knowledge and most importantly, to build a character. Sadly, her studies are disrupted one day when one of her classmates confronts her about her mother's time in jail, stressing the fact that Denver had to go there with her. After this incident, Denver stops socializing with people outside of her house. Moreover, she goes deaf in order not to be able to hear about her mother anymore. ñShe walked in silence too solid for penetrationñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 103). Her hearing returns only after the ghost arrives.

Belovedôs presence fills Denver with a tremendous joy and happiness at first. They have fun, playing games and enjoying each otherôs company for a whole month. Gradually, she starts being excluded from Beloved and Setheôs affairs. Firstly she assumes Sethe is the one to blame. She watches the two, ñalert for any sign that Beloved was in dangerò (Morrison, 1978, p. 240). However, she soon recognizes the danger Beloved represents when the dynamic between her and Sethe changes drastically. As she watches her mother transforming into a completely different person ï exhausted, famished and wretched, she decides to put a stop to it. This moment in the novel represents Denverôs loss of innocence. She finally gathers enough courage to act on her own, independently of her mother. Moreover, she finally sees her motherôs actions from a different perspective. She realizes Sethe was forced to do what she did because she was a victim of the large oppressive institution. It was important for Denver to stop dwelling on this single act and instead understand it as a part of a larger narrative (Rushdy, 1999, p. 51). She overcomes her fear and leaves the house encouraged by the spirit of her grandmother. Her transformation from a child to a woman happens in Lady Jonesôs house. She calls Denver a baby and it is this word that ñinaugurated her life in the world as a womanò (Morrison, 1987, p. 248). Her situation evokes pity in the neighbours and they provide her with enough food to keep Beloved and Sethe alive. Denver takes over the household, doing all the choirs, getting food and looking after them but gets nothing in return. She eventually comes to the conclusion that ñsomebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver eitherò (Morrison, 1987, p. 252). This sudden need for self-preservation is an important milestone in Denverôs identity development. Her maturity is further evident in her conversation with Paul D at the end of the novel which differs significantly to the rude and childish way she talked to him at the beginning. Moreover, when Paul D says ñIf you want my opinion-ñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 267), she interrupts him stating

she has her own opinions now. Denverôs loss of innocence happens much later than for example Pecolaôs in *The Bluest Eye*. The circumstances that surround her do not force her to face her sexuality as early as Pecola or Frieda therefore she remains a child for a long time before she enters womanhood.

Denver's character can be interpreted as a symbol of hope in the novel. She is born on the border separating the free territory from slavery, therefore she is partially trapped in her mother's horrific past but at the same time she represents a brighter future ahead. At the beginning of the novel, Denver is stuck in one place unable to develop as a person, but at the end, she finds her óselfô independent from anyone else, manages to rejoin the society and proves that there is a life beyond slavery and a hopeful future for everyone.

4.3.4 Beloved

The sentence ñAnything dead coming back to life hurtsñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 35) delivered by Amy Denver perfectly epitomizes the character of Beloved and essentially the whole premise of the novel. The novel is named after her but the true identity of the character remains ambiguous. Beloved can be interpreted in numerous ways. She might be just a runaway slave as Sethe initially assumes. Sethe might be simply projecting her own pain onto a peculiar stranger. She might be feeling drawn to her because she sees herself in her. ñFeel how it feels to be a colored woman roaming the roads with anything God made liable to jump on youò (Morrison, 1987, p. 33) she says to Paul D when he expresses his doubt about this woman. But the most common interpretation is that Beloved is an embodied spirit of the daughter Sethe murdered, the one who has been haunting her house for the past decade. In fact, there is enough evidence to prove this theory.

The first strange thing Sethe notices is Belovedôs name. It is the same name she had engraved on the headstone in exchange for ten-minute long sexual intercourse with the engraver. Furthermore, the girl seems to be the age her daughter would be now if she was alive. Beloved begins evoking Setheôs old memories since the first moment, but Sethe does not submit to the idea of her dead baby coming back until later. She does notice Belovedôs smooth hands and legs but brushes any doubts off unlike Paul D, who is bothered by Belovedôs ñshining and new shoesò (Morrison, 1987, p. 66). The strangest things seem to be her knowledge of Setheôs song she specifically made up to sing to her children and crystal earrings she received from Mrs. Garner which not even Denver knew about. Consequently, the perceptive Denver becomes the first person to suspect Beloved to be her reincarnated

sister. The theory that Beloved is in fact Setheôs daughter is further amplified by Sethe and Belovedôs very first encounter. ñFor some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Setheôs bladder filled to capacity [...] like flooding the boat when Denver was bornò (Morrison, 1987, p. 51). Beloved first introduction when she was seen walking out of water, followed by Setheôs sudden urge to urinate suggests the dead babyôs rebirth. She also has a scar on her neck at the same spot Sethe slit her daughter's throat eighteen years earlier.

Furthermore, the woman possesses the characteristics of an infant. Apart from her smooth baby-like skin, the greediness in her drinking is similar to a baby's gulping while being nursed, her legs are too weak for walking and the sentence ñshe was resting her head in the palm of her hand as though it was too heavy for a neck aloneñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 56) suggests the little control infants have over their head. Additionally, she craves sweets just like young children. She requires to be fed constantly, except she does not only crave food, but mostly stories from Sethe's past (Bloom, 2004, p. 23).

Sethe and Baby Suggs made a deal to never speak of the past, especially in front of Denver, because the memories were too painful. Regardless, when Beloved asks Sethe to tell her stories, she finds herself ñwanting to, liking itñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 58). Beloved helps Sethe remember things she believed to have forgotten. For example, she does not remember the language her mother spoke but she recalls the message Nan passed on her. Sethe keeps feeding Beloved the stories but Beloved reveals nothing about herself. She acts very mysteriously throughout the novel which makes Paul D resent her. He finds her vague character suspicious which results in a conflict between him and Sethe who feels protective of Beloved. Beloved becomes completely dependent on Sethe, following her around and watching her every move. Their relationship begins to be toxic and parasitic.

Simultaneously, Denver forms an unhealthy attachment to Beloved. Her theory that Beloved is her reborn sister is confirmed when she asks her about the place she came from and Beloved answers: ñNothing to breathe down there and no room to move in. [é] A lot of people is down there. Some is deadñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 75). Beloved clearly describes the world beyond life, giving the novel a horror undertone. Denver whose identity has always been connected to her mother suddenly starts conflating it with Beloved's. At the same time, Beloved conflates her identity with Sethe's. When Beloved seduces Paul D, it might be due to this particular reason. Another explanation is she simply wants to hurt

Sethe because ñshe left [her] behind, by [herself]ñ (Morrison, 1987, p. 75) in the darkness. According to Borey (2000), the struggle of forming and owning one's identity was a heavy issue among black slaves during slavery. To a certain level, Beloved helps Denver eventually find her own identity, when she separates her from Sethe and excludes her from their affairs towards the end of the novel.

The second part of the novel contains a chapter narrated from Belovedôs perspective. She describes the place where she comes from. The imagery changes ï she can see clouds and water, night and day. ñDaylight comes through the cracksò (Morrison, 1987, p. 210). There are people who frighten her as well as horrifying images - men without skin, dead bodies piled together, people defecating themselves et cetera. Beloved is crouching along with everyone else, unable to escape. Eventually, she sees Setheôs face and she wants to join: ñI am gone now I am her faceò (Morrison, 1987, p. 213). Finally, she emerges from the water. This passage is written as a stream of consciousness, thus it feels more intense than any of the previous chapters. Beloved is clearly used here as a symbol of the immense suffering of African slaves. The description Morrison gives resembles the conditions in which slaves were forced to live during the Middle Passage - a voyage human cargo ships made from Africa to America. Morrison gives a voice to the millions of victims of the transatlantic trade via Beloved.

Although being mostly depicted as a negative character (sucking the life out of Sethe, seducing Paul D and separating Denver from her mother), Beloved played a significant part in all the other charactersô lives. Not only did her actions lead Denver to leave the house and find her independent self, but most importantly she also helped Sethe cope with the painful memories that had been haunting her for eighteen years. Furthermore, she unites the community which was shattered before she entered the scene. Thus, she is a representation of hope that no matter how painful the past was, there is always a possibility of a bright future.

5 THE USE OF TONI MORRISONôS NOVEL S IN AN ENGLISH CLASS

When choosing a specific book for an English literature lesson it is always necessary to take the age of the students into consideration. Based on this information the teacher can adjust the lesson according to their speaking level, comprehension skills, special needs and other aspects. The course of the lesson as well as the choice of materials used in it will differ with younger learners, adolescents and adult learners. Before the lesson we should consider what message we want to send and what aims we want to reach at the end. Motivation is another important factor we should consider while preparing a lesson plan. Choosing suitable teaching methods and techniques keeps the learners interested.

The book should always be chosen appropriately according to its themes as well. Topics such as race or sexual abuse can be too sensitive for some students so it is better if the teacher is familiar with the individual students in their class. The teacher should adjust the atmosphere in the classroom as well and encourage the learners to share their opinions while letting them know all opinions are welcome no matter how different they may be.

As previous chapters suggest, Toni Morrisonôs novels in particular deal with topics such as race, gender inequality, poverty and interpersonal relationships. Some of the themes might be more relatable to the readers than others. However, the purpose of the lesson on Toni Morrisonôs work is to introduce a different culture to the audience. The main aim is to make the learners view racial and gender issues perhaps from a different perspective while pointing out the similarities between the problems of the 19th to early 20th century and today. Learners will find it easier to understand the book if they find the characters or situations relatable to a certain degree.

Below are three lesson plans focused on the three respective novels ï *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*. The first lesson plan concentrates mostly on the concept of beauty standards and their impact on women. The second lesson plan focuses on the relationships between the characters in *Sula*, and lastly the topic of the third lesson plan is racism and the question of freedom in *Beloved*. Extracts from the books are attached in the appendix.

5.1 Lesson plan 1

Topic of the lesson: Beauty standards in *The Bluest Eye*

Age of the learners: 15-16

Number of the learners: 12

Materials: the novel *The Bluest Eye*, magazines, whiteboard, printed copies of the selected passages from the book

Duration: 90 minutes

Objectives:

- the students actively participate in the discussion and group work
- the students interpret the text in order to discuss and predict the story, characterization and themes
- the students comment on the issues of beauty standards, racism, self-worth
- the students apply the topics of the book to the present situation

Warm-up activity (10 minutes):

Brainstorming: What would the most beautiful person in the world look like? The students will have two minutes to write down as many words describing the most beautiful person in the world as they imagine them as possible. I will then write the word ñbeautifulò on the whiteboard and ask the students to read their ideas out loud. I will write them on the whiteboard for the students to compare. I expect the students to have similar ideas focused mostly on the physical side of the person described.

Discussion (25 minutes):

Before we begin the discussion, I will show the students a few popular contemporary magazines and tell them to focus on the pictures in them.

Questions for the discussion:

Which physical type of a person prevails in the magazines?

Have beauty standards changed since the 1940s?

Who determines what is or is not beautiful?

How do beauty standards affect oneôs self-worth?

Imagine you are a dark skinned girl living during the end of the Great Depression. What kinds of problems could you face?

Reading of the selected parts of the novel (30 minutes):

The students will receive a printed version of the prologue from the novel along with a dictionary to look up any unfamiliar words or expressions. They will read the text silently.

Group work: After reading the text the students will get in groups of three to answer the following questions: Why do you think Morrison decided to open the novel with the Dick and Jane story and why is it repeated three times? Who do you think is the narrator of the novel? Who is the protagonist? Can you predict what happens further in the novel?

Then they will proceed to read the second text (appendix 1). Before reading, I will explain who Shirley Temple and Bojangles were.

Discussion after reading (20 minutes):

Questions:

How does the Dick and Jane story differ from Pecolaôs family situation?

Can you see any similarities between the two?

Why do you think Pecola and Frieda adore Shirley Temple so much? Why does the narrator Claudia hate her?

Do you think racism is still an issue today?

Have you ever witnessed someone being bullied because of their race or poverty?

Conclusion (5 minutes):

Reflection of the lesson: I ask students what they liked about the lesson, whether there is anything they would change and what important lesson they learned from it.

Homework: Rewrite the text from Pecolaôs point of view.

5.2 Lesson plan 2

Topic of the lesson: Interpretation of Toni Morrisonôs *Sula*

Age of the learners: 18-19

Number of the learners: 12

Materials: the novel *Sula*, exercise books

Duration: 90 minutes

Objectives:

- the students actively participate in the discussion and they work with a partner
- the students interpret the text in order to discuss the story, characters and themes
- the students act out a passage from the book
- the students suggest an alternate ending to the story

Introduction (10 minutes): The studentsô task for the lesson was to read the novel *Sula*. For opening I would like to ask them about their overall thoughts and impressions about the book.

Work in pairs (15 minutes): The students work in pairs. Their task is to write down characteristics of a good friend/friendship. When they are finished, they share their ideas with the rest of the class.

Discussion (25 minutes):

Questions:

Can you recall any of the characteristics mentioned in the class being represented in the novel?

Sula and Nel are very different in nature. Why do you think they are drawn to each other?

How would the story differ if Sula and Nel were men?

How would the story go if Nel was raised by Hannah and Eva while Sula was raised by Helene?

Who did you sympathize with while reading the novel? Was there a strictly good or bad character?

Was the reaction of the community to Sula justified?

Drama activity (25 minutes): The students are divided into groups of three and asked to act out one of the scenes from the novel. The rest of the class will try to guess which part they are acting out.

Speaking activity (10 minutes): The students are asked to come up with an alternate ending of the story.

Conclusion (5 minutes):

Reflection of the lesson: I ask students what they liked about the lesson, whether there is anything they would change and what important lesson they learned from it.

Homework: Write an essay (200-300 words) about the concept of motherhood in the novel *Sula.*

5.3 Lesson plan 3

Topic of the lesson: Racism and the question of freedom in *Beloved*

Age of the learners: 15-16

Number of the learners: 12

Materials: data projector + pictures of the slave era, 4 pieces of paper, markers, printed copies of the excerpt from the novel

Duration: 90 minutes

Objectives:

- the students actively participate in the discussion and group work
- the students interpret the text in order to discuss the story, characters and themes
- the students comment on the issues of slavery, racism, freedom and the current situation of African-Americans

Introduction (5 minutes): At the beginning of the lesson, I will show the students various pictures of black people at the time of slavery in the USA using the data projector.

Group work (20 minutes): The students are divided into small groups and each group receives a blank sheet of paper. Their task is to think about how black people were treated during the slave era and how they are treated nowadays and write their ideas down. Each group will present their ideas in front of the classroom. After the presentations, the students will comment on each otherôs presentations and compare the ideas of each group.

Discussion before reading (20 minutes): The students will answer the following questions:

What does freedom mean to you?

What do you think freedom meant to black women at the time of slavery?

Is losing freedom worse than dying?

To what lengths are you willing to go to protect the people you love?

Reading the extract (15 minutes): The students will silently read the selected passage from the novel (appendix 2).

Discussion after reading (25 minutes):

Do you think Sethe was justified in killing her child?

How would you react if you were in Sethe's situation?

Can Sethe ever move on from her past?

Was the situation during the slave era the same for black men and black women?

What do you think about Morrison's portrayal of white people? How has the issue of racism changed in the last hundred/fifty/ten years? Do black people have equal rights to white people now?

Can you think of a situation in your life when you weren't feeling free? How did it make you feel?

Conclusion (5 minutes):

Reflection of the lesson: I ask students what they liked about the lesson, whether there is anything they would change and what important lesson they learned from it.

Homework: Write a letter to Sethe (50-100 words). Tell her what you think about what she did and try to give her advice.

CONCLUSION

The thesis deals with the concept of black womanhood in Toni Morrisonôs fiction. Black experience is the primary focus of most of Toni Morrisonôs novels. She particularly explores complexity of female characters in her books, focusing on their femininity in relation to race and identity. The aim of this thesis was to introduce the work of Toni Morrison in context of African-American literature and to analyze individual women characters in three of her selected novels ï *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*.

The first part of the thesis is theoretical and focuses on the introduction of Toni Morrison. The first chapter contains a general overview of African-American women writers. It was discovered that the main subject of their work has always been a fight for their place in a predominantly white male world. They also share interest in depicting interpersonal relationships, such as those between men and women, mothers and daughters or women and God. African-American women used literature as a way to celebrate their blackness but most importantly to share their experience of being one of the most oppressed groups in history.

The second chapter deals with Toni Morrisonôs life and literary work. Her journey from working as an editor in New York to becoming a world famous author is illustrated and her literary work is listed in a chronological order. Morrison often uses her own experiences with racism, poverty and women issues in her novels as well as experiences of other people she has encountered.

Finally, the third chapter concentrates on the main themes of Toni Morrisonôs novels which often recur and can also be found in the three selected books. Firstly, it is the theme of racism which is not only portrayed as oppression from white people, but also as an issue within the black community. The second theme which is often included in Morrisonôs novels is womanhood and womenôs sexuality. This topic is heavily represented in all three novels in terms of loss of innocence, stereotypes and sexual oppression. Motherhood and quest for identity are other important themes in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*. Morrison makes a point about black women struggling to find their true ñselvesò after the Civil War and in the midst of racial segregation. Toni Morrison is also known for being a folklorist, thus the topic of myth and African folklore is explored as well.

The second part of the thesis is analytical. Individual female characters of each selected novel were thoroughly analyzed with the primary focus on their womanhood. In *The*

Bluest Eye, it was found that the mother-daughter relationship is a crucial factor in building oneøs identity, especially in a black society. Support from family and community along with personal strength are important aspects of achieving self-acceptance in a white-dominated world. This was proven with comparison of the characters of Pecola and Claudia and their respective mothers who provided them with very different upbringing.

Similarly to *The Bluest Eye, Sula* is also a coming-of-age story about two young girls. There is a certain parallel between the main characters as well. Sula and Pecola are both drowning in loneliness caused by the cold relationships they have with their mothers. Moreover, they both become the targets in their communities due to their uniqueness. Sula represents a woman who refuses to submit herself to conventions and stereotypes that were forced upon black women in the 1930øs. She has to pay a high price for her independency. In comparison, her best friend Nel yields to the pressure of society but struggles to find her identity.

In regards to *Beloved*, it is quite obvious why the novel is considered to have a big cultural value. Morrison pays tribute to the victims of the institution of slavery by writing an allegorical figure, Beloved, who represents the painful history of African-American people invading their present. However, Morrison is optimistic and in the end allows her characters to collectively heal. In terms of womanhood, the main character Sethe is initially unable to separate herself from her children. Contrary to Pauline Breedloveøs character from *The Bluest Eye*, who did not care about her children, Sethe is a mother before she is a human. Her love for her children is so strong that she decides to kill them before handing them back to the master. Consequently, the ghost of her deceased child haunts her house and the community distances themselves from her. There is a similarity between Sethe and Eva Peace from *Sula*, who also killed her child in order to save him from a worthless life. Eventually, Sethe is able to cope with her past and find her identity.

In conclusion, the main characters from all three novels have to face the struggle of being outcasts in their respective communities. As a result, they all feel lonely and struggle to find their identities. While Pecola and Sula never fit in, Sethe manages to rejoin the community in the end. Morrison explores the destructive nature of racism in each of the books ï for Pecola and Pauline it is the imposing of white beauty standards on black women, for Sula and Nel it is the stereotypes African-American women had to endure and for Sethe it is the dehumanization of black women that was common in the 19th century.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1

Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; and Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail.

She came with nothing. No little paper bag with the other dress, or a nightgown, or two pair of whitish cotton bloomers. She just appeared with a white woman and sat down.

We had fun in those few days Pecola was with us. Frieda and I stopped fighting each other and concentrated on our guest, trying hard to keep her from feeling outdoors.

When we discovered that she clearly did not want to dominate us, we liked her. She laughed when I clowned for her, and smiled and accepted gracefully the food gifts my sister gave her.

ñWould you like some graham crackers?ò

ñI donôt care.ò

Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Templeôs dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cute Shirley Temple was. I couldnôt join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels.

(MORRISON, T. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Penguin Books, 1970. ISBN 0452273056)

Appendix 2

Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. Yet she knew Setheôs greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginningð that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meantð what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with lifeð Beloved might leave. Leave before Sethe could make her realize that worse than thatð far worseð was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldnôt like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldnôt think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thingð the part of her that was clean. No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, feetless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A; whether the bubbling-hot girls in the colored-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughterôs private parts, soiled her daughterôs thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon. She might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter.

(MORRISON, T. *Beloved.* New York: Penguin Books, 1987. ISBN 0452264464)

ANOTACE

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Rok obhajoby:	2019

Název závěrečné práce:	Vyobrazení afroamerických žen v díle Toni Morrison
Název závěrečné práce v angličtině:	The Concept of Black Womanhood in Toni Morrison's Fiction
Anotace závěrečné práce:	Tato práce se zabývá vyobrazením afroamerických žen v díle Toni Morrison. Teoretická část uvádí Toni Morrison v kontextu afroamerické literatury. Tato část obsahuje mimo jiné i popis hlavních témat jejích románů. Analytická část se zaměřuje na jednotlivé postavy v románech *Nejmodřejší oči*, *Sula* a *Milovaná*.
Klíčová slova:	Toni Morrison, black womanhood, analysis, Beloved, Sula, The Bluest Eye
Anotace v angličtině:	The diploma thesis deals with the concept of black womanhood in Toni Morrison's fiction. The theoretical part introduces Toni Morrison in context of African-American literature. The main themes and topics of her novels are explored as well. The analytical part focuses on individual female characters in Morrison's three novels - *The Bluest Eye, Sula* and *Beloved*.
Rozsah práce:	67 s.
Jazyk práce:	anglický jazyk