



Pedagogická
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Faculty
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v Českých Budějovicích
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in České Budějovice

Jihočeská univerzita v Českých Budějovicích
Pedagogická fakulta
Katedra anglistiky

Diplomová práce

**Race and Gender in the Selected Works of Toni
Morrison**
**Rasa a gender ve vybraných dílech Toni
Morrisonové**

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České Budějovice 2023

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Ráda bych poděkovala vedoucí své diplomové práce PhDr. Alici Sukdolové, Ph.D., která mě jednak nechala samostatně pracovat, ale zároveň mi byla vždy ochotná poskytnout cenné rady, doporučení či připomínky při zpracovávání této diplomové práce.

Anotace

Předmětem zkoumání diplomové práce bude literární a kritický odkaz významné afroamerické spisovatelky Toni Morrisonové. Práce v úvodu podá charakteristiku moderní afroamerické literatury 20. století, zmíní význam Harlemské renesance a jejích hlavních zástupců (Zora Neale Hurston) a postupně se zaměří na rasovou a genderovou problematiku v díle současné autorky Toni Morrisonové. Jádrem práce bude literárněvědná analýza tří vybraných děl, *The Bluest Eye*, *God Help the Child*, *Beloved*, v jejichž interpretaci bude autorka pracovat s pojmem "double oppression", se ztvárněním ženské identity a jinakosti ve vybraných románech a pokusí se postihnout význam kategorie žánru Bildungsroman v kontextu poetiky děl Toni Morrisonové. Závěrečná kapitola zhodnotí kritické dílo afroamerické autorky z pohledu literární vědy s ohledem na téma jinakosti a odlišnosti literárních menšin a výjimečných autorů.

Abstract

The focus of the diploma thesis will be the literary and critical legacy of the significant African American writer Toni Morrison. In the introduction, the work will provide a description of modern African American literature of the 20th century, mentioning the importance of the Harlem Renaissance and its main representatives (Zora Neale Hurston) and will gradually focus on race and gender issues in the work of Toni Morrison. The core of the work will be a literary analysis of three selected novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *God Help the Child*, *Beloved*, in the interpretation of which the author will work with the concept of "double oppression", with the portrayal of female identity and otherness in the selected novels and will try to understand the meaning of the Bildungsroman genre category in the context of the poetics of Toni Morrison's works. The final chapter will evaluate the critical work of the African American author from the perspective of literary studies with regard to the theme of otherness of literary minorities and exceptional authors.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION	3
Harlem Renaissance – New Negro Movement	5
African American Female Perspective.....	9
TONI MORRISON, HER BIOGRAPHY, AND HER WRITING STYLE	15
CENTRAL THEMES IN MORRISON’S NOVELS	19
Race and racism.....	20
The psychology of American racism.....	22
Gender	24
Gendered differences.....	24
Womanhood, motherhood	27
Migration and slavery.....	28
Slave narrative as a literary genre	32
Slavewomen’s narrative	33
Neoslave narrative	36
The genesis of <i>Beloved</i>	37
The reflection of African culture in literature	38
THE ANALYSIS OF <i>THE BLUEST EYE</i>	42
Background.....	42
Synopsis	44
Autumn.....	45
Winter.....	46
Spring.....	46
Summer	46
Themes and symbols in <i>The Bluest Eye</i>	47
Race and racism.....	47
Internalized racism and self-loathing	51
The Concept of Beauty	52
The symbolism of the blue eyes.....	55
Family as a safe harbour.....	56
Cultural discourse and the black community.....	60
THE ANALYSIS OF <i>BELOVED</i>	62
Background.....	62

Synopsis	63
The themes and symbols in <i>Beloved</i>	65
Slavery and gendered differences	65
Self-awareness and identity	68
Love, womanhood, and motherhood.....	71
Memory and ‘rememory’	74
The symbolism of trees	77
The African culture and the afterlife	78
Magical reality	83
THE ANALYSIS OF <i>GOD HELP THE CHILD</i>	84
Background.....	84
Synopsis	86
Themes and symbols in <i>God Help the Child</i>	87
Race, racism, and subalternity	87
Trauma and identity	91
Bride’s trauma	92
Rain’s trauma.....	95
Booker’s trauma	96
Love, motherhood, and family	97
The African traditions and magical realism	101
The symbolism of earrings	104
THE CONCEPT OF “OTHERNESS” IN MORRISON’S WORKS	104
CONCLUSION	108
RESUMÉ	109
SOURCES.....	111
Primary sources	111
Secondary sources.....	111
Electronic sources.....	114
Interviews	115

INTRODUCTION

My diploma thesis will aim at introducing the African American literary tradition, from its roots to the contemporary works and will focus on three selected novels written by the foremost African American female writer, Toni Morrison. The introductory chapters will present the history of black literature and the impact of Harlem Renaissance on it. It will further offer an overview of the African American female writers' perspectives and of Toni Morrison's life and her writing style. In the theoretical part the central themes of Morrison's novels will be characterized, namely race and racism, gender issues, migration and slavery, and the reflection of African culture in Morrison's fiction.

The interpretative part of this thesis will elaborate on the themes of race and gender in the selected novels. The motifs of motherhood, trauma, African traditional heritage, and magic will be considered as well. *The Bluest Eye*, the first novel Toni Morrison became famous for, tells a story about an abused little girl growing up in a racist world of the 1940s. The main theme which will be analysed in this novel, apart from racial and gender issues, is the role of family in the process of a child's coming of age. The symbolism of blue eyes in relation to magical realism will also be explained. Next chapter will focus on Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel from the 1980s, *Beloved*, which falls into the genre of a slave narrative, therefore the key subjects for its analysis will be trauma, slavery, and injustice. The third novel selected for analysis is Morrison's last novel, published in 2015, *God Help the Child*, which is similar to her first novel in several ways, as it once again places a young hurt black girl at the novel's centre, however, the protagonist of Morrison's last novel does not experience racial self-loathing and is able to recognize her own beauty and use her race to her own advantage. Its important motifs and symbols will be explained along with recurring themes in all three novels under analysis.

The last chapter of my diploma thesis will conclude the concept of 'otherness' which Morrison frequently uses in relation with race and racism. It refers to something unknown and therefore dangerous, a feeling white people usually have when approaching black people.

I have chosen the topic for my thesis after reading *The Bluest Eye* which fascinated me and make me want to read more stories of what Black people had to experience during this

extremely painful historical period. Despite the cruelty of the author's stories, I admire the ease with which Morrison was able to tell them.

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

The roots of African American literary tradition date back to the 18th century when the first black poet was noticed and became known to Americans. The historical experience would probably suggest male writers being more respected than the female ones, nevertheless, in this case, the first black poet of notice was a woman, Phillis Wheatley. New literary movements are always born as a result of historical events and beliefs which lead to the recurrence of particular tendencies in the writing of the respective authors; recurring motifs and themes occur in African American literature as well. The most frequently depicted themes include slavery, racial and gender inequality, social injustice, and poverty, as most black writers themselves were either kidnapped or heard that it happened to one of their relatives and were brought to another country across the world against their will and such an act definitely leaves its mark on that person. For this reason, the desire for revenge and justice can be felt in the works as well as a detailed description of the very often brutal treatment of slaves, perhaps as not to forget the people who have met such a fate.

Phillis Wheatly came to be one of those Black people, she was kidnapped and enslaved in 1761, she was brought to Boston from West Africa and sold to John Wheatly, a tailor, in order to serve his wife. One would expect her to feel unhappy and frustrated about her situation, but it was the other way round, she eventually felt lucky to be purchased by the Wheatly family for they offered her a great life unusual for a slave – they treated her as their own child and never harmed her. They even recognized her talent for writing, tutored her in English and she was allowed to study foreign languages, such as Latin or Greek.

Wheatly drew inspiration from the authors of neoclassical poets, for instance, Alexander Pope, who also dealt with the theme of morality and freedom in his literary works. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) concerning social injustice and the universal concept of humanity is Wheatly's first piece of writing, the first work of African American literature as well, and it can be considered one of the most influential books of this literary tradition. She refers to the Christian gospel, to the story of Cain and Abel in particular, and cleverly proves

that Black people are as capable of creating works of art as whites; she further emphasizes the idea of equal rights for both blacks and whites in this book.¹

During the period called Antebellum, meaning 'before the war', the genre of the 'Plantation Myth' first gained popularity; nevertheless, the southern agrarian region was displayed as a picturesque place unspoiled by northern capitalism. Great efforts have been made to view slavery as an opportunity for the blacks to lead an exciting and enjoyable life, but as the term suggest, the portrayal of slavery was deliberately partly mythological for in reality families were split up, physical and mental abuse was happening on an everyday basis as often as sexual assaults and people were suffering from starvation and extreme poverty.

Slaves believed and latched onto the ideas of two main reformers whose demands seemed slightly distinct from one another. Booker T. Washington inspired many African American people mainly with one specific piece of writing, his self-biography, called *Up from Slavery* (1901) which encouraged many blacks to feel as valuable as whites and to achieve equal treatment before the law. In contrast to him, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, a professor of sociology, contradicted Washington's main principle and preferred for the blacks to manage to become self-sufficient as soon as possible after being freed from slavery.²

The early 19th-century literature arises from an urgent need for whites to be punished for the sin of slavery; in addition, the different attitudes of the American North and South to slavery led to the beginning of the most significant conflict of the 19th century in America, which escalated to Civil War. Between 1815 and 1861 the gap between the Union, meaning the northern countries which did not own slaves, and the Confederate State of America, comprising the southern part of North America which fought in order to keep slavery, even widened. The north became more industrial, the economy flourished due to the investment in the transportation system of roads, canals, whereas the crucial sector of the southern economy was rather agriculture. Thanks to the favourable environmental conditions for growing crops on plantations, such as cotton, these goods were successfully produced. By

¹ ANDREWS, W. L. African American literature: Antebellum literature. *Encyclopedia Britannica* [online]. Chicago (Illinois): The Britannica Group, 2022, August 18, 2022 [cit. 2022-10-27]. Dostupné z: <https://www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature#ref232345>

² ANDREWS, W. L. African American literature: The late 19th and early 20th centuries. *Encyclopedia Britannica* [online]. Chicago (Illinois): The Britannica Group, 2022, August 18, 2022 [cit. 2022-10-27]. Dostupné z: <https://www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature/The-late-19th-and-early-20th-centuries>

comparison with the north, the southerners believed that owning slaves is more important than investing in financial industry or transportation system for slaves did all the hard manual work for them. Literary works of African American fiction provide us with a detailed description of the demanding hard work on plantations slaves had to do and how it affected their lives.

Harlem Renaissance – New Negro Movement

The panic of 1893 resulting in high rates of vacancy led to the development of Harlem, a district of New York City, as a township. Harlem is associated mainly with the literary movement of Harlem Renaissance, which set the stage for the civil rights movement, and New Negro Movement which emerged during the 1920s. Alain Locke is considered a leader of this creative development of literature for he wrote an anthology *The New Negro* in 1925 explaining the expression 'New Negro' and its origin. Locke defines 'New Negro' as "more assertive and self-confident than 'Old Negro'" which naturally led other poets to question the standards of white people and in what ways the blacks differ from them.³

Langston Hughes, a central figure of Harlem Renaissance, fell in love with poetry and devoted himself mainly to it. He came from a diverse environment and his family moved a lot, so he had lived in six different American cities before he reached puberty. He worked in various fields, for instance as a waiter, truck farmer, cook, and visited many places such as Mexico, France, the Canary Islands, Italy, and West Africa, which greatly influenced his poems.

Nevertheless, he was gifted enough to write novels, essays, short stories and plays as well; like other representatives of this movement, he portrayed primarily the life of black people belonging to the working-class but tried to avoid negative stereotypes and wanted to stick to reality, to record the life and frustrations of black people faithfully. Therefore, he was marked by his assistant Lindsay Patterson as the most abused poet in America. He was highly criticised even by black critics for picturing black people in a bad light and not just emphasising the good in them.

³ ANDREWS, W. L. African American literature: The Harlem Renaissance. *Encyclopedia Britannica* [online]. Chicago (Illinois): The Britannica Group, 2022, August 18, 2022 [cit. 2022-10-27]. Dostupné z: <https://www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature/The-rise-of-the-New-Negro#ref232355>

Hughes grew up in Harlem where many stores were owned by Jewish people whom he encountered quite often, and he took advantage of that experience and wrote a collection of poems called *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) which became an important part of his work. Despite the heavy criticism by both white and black intellectuals, Hughes was very popular with and accepted by ordinary black people who enjoyed especially the stories of a fictional character Jesse B. Semple whom they could identify with. The name of this character is usually shortened to *Simple* in the stories, which corresponds with the simplicity of depicting the life of a poor black man in a racist American society through the troubles he goes through; poverty, unsuccessful and not long-lasting relationships with women, struggling at work, and feeling lost.⁴

At the beginning of the 20th century, Robert S. Abbott founded the most influential African American newspaper – *Chicago Defender*. It reported on the contrasting living conditions and work opportunities in the urban north and rural south which encouraged even more black people to migrate north. During the 1950s *Chicago Defender* became a daily newspaper to which many significant poets or novelists contributed, for instance, Willard Motley, poets Gwendolyn Brooks or Langston Hughes who regularly published the stories of ‘*Simple*’ (*Jesse B. Semple*) in the *Defender* column since 1942.

Another significant event of the New Negro Movement is the Great Depression, a worldwide downturn of the economy beginning with the stock market crash in 1929, in the United States. This devastating event resulted in many American people losing their jobs, and this hardship and suffering they went through led a number of them to suicide. Among other events, a Great Migration took place; predominantly black people migrated from rural to urban spaces and from the southern to northern and western parts of the country. The feeling of joy and sorrow that accompanied such a journey is compellingly captured in the works of the most prominent female writer of Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston.

Hurston's work was criticized by black people because they felt that it did not adequately portray the true cruelty, hopelessness, and powerlessness associated with the lives of their relatives or African Americans in general in relation to their everyday reality.

⁴ Langston Hughes. *The Poetry Foundation* [online]. Chicago (Illinois), 2022 [cit. 2022-10-27]. Dostupné z: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes>

Hurston's masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) celebrates the African American culture and its setting in Eatonville, Florida, portrays the rural southern region along with the characteristic features of this kind of environment, such as town gossip, female oppression, abuse, poverty, reliance on the power of God and nature. The main character of this novel is a young woman, Janie, who embarks on a journey of searching for and building her personal identity and tries to grow into a self-reliant woman; she also experiences violence in marriage, becomes a target of town gossip, and eventually is forced to end her relationship with the only man she has ever loved and cared for, named Tea Cake. Hurston did not choose Eatonville as a setting randomly; she actually grew up in this first all-black town, went to school there, and after her mother died, she joined a group of travellers and sought refuge; she eventually settled down in New York.

Harlem is a place where another important representative of the Harlem Renaissance James Baldwin, grew up. He experienced life in extreme poverty and lived in a family of twelve. During adolescence he fulfilled the duties of a preacher in a small revival church in Harlem; he described this period of his life in a semi-autobiographical novel which he published in 1953, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The protagonist of this story is a 14-year-old John serving as a preacher whose soul and thoughts are deeply analysed; the novel also refers to the Bible and the position of blacks in American society. He began his playwright career with a play about faith and family, it is set in Harlem and follows a story of a female preacher, *The Amen Corner* (1955).⁵

Moreover, Baldwin greatly influenced other writers in terms of his engaging writing style and the courageous act of presenting the theme of racism in his works in a different, not hateful, and non-violent way. One of the African American writers Baldwin had an impact on and was admired by is a foremost novelist following the tradition of Harlem Renaissance – Toni Morrison. She wrote up her thoughts, opinions, and attitudes towards several phenomena in one of her latest books, *Mouth Full of Blood* (2019), a collection of essays, speeches, and meditations; in this work, she also expresses her admiration for Baldwin's writing and personality.

⁵ ANDREWS, W. L. African American literature: The advent of urban realism. *Encyclopedia Britannica* [online]. Chicago (Illinois): The Britannica Group, 2022, August 18, 2022 [cit. 2022-10-27]. Dostupné z: <https://www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature/The-advent-of-urban-realism#ref232361>

The second gift was your courage, which you let us share. The courage of one who could go as a stranger in the village and transform the distances between people into intimacy with the whole world;...It was you who gave us courage to appropriate an alien, hostile, all-white geography because you had discovered that “this world [meaning world] is white no longer, and it will never be white again.”...It is a courage that came from a ruthless intelligence married to a pity so profound it could convince anyone who cared to know that those who despised us “need the moral authority of their former slaves, who are the only people in the world who know anything about them and who may be, indeed, the only people in the world who really care anything about them.”⁶

In this eulogy addressed to her fellow author, Morrison points out the paradoxical fact that black people who have been mistreated by whites for several years were in fact more humane and respected moral principles more than the slaveholders did. It shows the difference in cultural traditions and societal principles, for black people dwell on history, and parents of colour are very careful about the way they talk about the fragile topic of race and racism with their children. They outline the inequalities in race, gender, opportunities, and living conditions, and try to prepare their children for the problems that await them in the future in connection with racial prejudice.

In 1952, Ralph Ellison, a famous American novelist, essayist, and critic, published one of the most outstanding novels of African American literary tradition – *Invisible Man* which elaborates on seeking identity using the allegory of the invisibility of black people in a racist society. Ellison wrote this masterpiece so cleverly and also inserted the elements of existentialism into it for he dealt with the concept of social and racial invisibility. The figurative invisibility of the main character, who is also the unnamed narrator of the story, is explained at the beginning of the novel – he feels ignored and misunderstood because everyone judges him only based on their expectations of black men, not as the unique free-thinking individual he desires to be. The novel follows a story of a southern youth, slightly naïve, who joins a brotherhood, and spends some time in Harlem fighting against the oppression of black people. Eventually, he becomes disillusioned in his journey of creating his own identity within a racist society filled with racial myths and biases; he leaves the brotherhood in aversion to their

⁶ MORRISON, Toni. God's Language: James Baldwin Eulogy. In: MORRISON, Toni. *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations*. London: Vintage Publishing, 2019, s. 231. ISBN 9781529110883.

ideals, leaps into a manhole, and hibernates until the time has come for him to re-join the surface world again. The narrator's psychological and moral development suggests that this novel falls within the literary tradition of bildungsroman. Ellison was awarded the National Book Award for fiction in 1953, for he innovated the writing style by combining classic literary motifs with the modern Black language and culture.⁷

Ellison was encouraged to start writing his own literary works by Richard Wright, another influential writer of the 20th century, whom Ellison befriended when he moved to New York City. Richard Wright was born in Mississippi to parents of colour and lower status and therefore learned about life in the South. His unhappy childhood lived in poverty, fortunately, did not affect his writing, nevertheless, the path to fulfilling his dream of becoming a writer was made even more difficult by his origin and skin colour. Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940) had an impact on many people for they could at least partially identify with the main character being upset with how white America in the time of 1930s makes him feel being black. He shows the harsh reality of slave life and the possibilities of protest against their inhuman treatment; his outstanding courage and ability to depict such a cruel reality made him one of the most famous and respected authors of the 20th century.

African American Female Perspective

Female novelists and poets began to be acknowledged later than male writers but that does not mean their works are less valuable, less important, or less enjoyable; it was partially given by the social norms and the state of society back in the first half of the 20th century and even earlier when women were viewed as beings for bearing children only. African American women were mostly denied the right to make decisions for themselves, their lives were controlled by their men or the whites who owned them. Most of these writers sought to portray a true image of the lives of African Americans and fought to achieve equality between men and women, and whites and black in all fields. They longed for the improvement of the educational system so it would allow black females to enter universities, get an education, and therefore better job opportunities particularly leading to the possibility of living a simple but dignified life as an ordinary woman. As an American emeritus Professor of African

⁷ ANDREWS, W. L. African American literature: The advent of urban realism. *Encyclopedia Britannica* [online]. Chicago (Illinois): The Britannica Group, 2022, August 18, 2022 [cit. 2022-10-27]. Dostupné z: <https://www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature/The-advent-of-urban-realism#ref232361>

American studies and Charles Howard Candler Professor of English and Women's Studies at Emory University, Frances Smith Foster, asserts, African American women writers have "used the Word as both a tool and a weapon to correct, to create, and to confirm their visions of life as it was and as it could become".⁸

The first work of African American literature was created as early as the 18th century by an African woman enslaved and brought to Rhode Island, Lucy Terry Prince. She lived in Deerfield, Massachusetts as a young woman, and in 1746, she was inspired to compose a poem *Bars Fight* by historical circumstances surrounding her, specifically, a Native American attack on white Americans that occurred in the section of the city of Deerfield called "The Bars", another term for meadows. The poem was published many years later, when an American novelist and poet, Josiah Gilbert Holland decided to publish it along with other poems in a collection concerning the history of the western part of Massachusetts, in 1855. Along with Phillis Wheatly, Lucy Terry laid the foundations of the African American literary tradition by writing in various genres including poetry, non-fiction, autobiography, journalism, and fiction. Moreover, they shared the desire for being acknowledged and respected in society with later writers and therefore, used similar thematic concepts concerning religion, citizenship, sexuality, and motherhood.

African American female writers including Anne Spencer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Marita Bonner, who are considered central figures of the Harlem Renaissance even though most of them did not spend much time in Harlem, offered their perspectives on literature as early as the 1920s. As for the 1920s, Jessie Redmon Fauset known as a poet, novelist and educator cannot be missed. She was born in 1882 in New Jersey and perhaps was the first black female student ever to study at Cornell University. In 1912, Fauset began to write for *The Crisis*, a magazine co-founded by William E. B. Du Bois in 1909 and established by the NAACP, which stands for the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. Later in 1919, she became the magazine's editor, prompting her to move to New York, and the position of a literary editor gave her the opportunity to introduce works of other writers, such as Anne Spencer, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes.

⁸ FOSTER, Frances Smith. *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 2.

Leaders of the New Negro Movement, for instance, Alain Locke, and James Weldon Johnson, shared a belief precisely described by Fauset through the character of Joanna Marshall, who is the protagonist of her work concerning racial prejudice and discrimination published in 1924 called *There Is Confusion*. Joanna insists “that if there’s anything that will break down prejudice it will be equality or perhaps even superiority on the part of colored people in the arts.”⁹ Fauset and Locke lived in the period of the 1920s and 1930s called the Roaring Twenties, often referred to as the Jazz Age as well for the most popular music genre of those times was jazz. Jazz music was primarily created by black people and white people enjoyed the art of African Americans so much that it would seem to encourage them, and especially white politicians, to support the rights of African Americans in the USA. Unfortunately, it had not had such an effect, on the other hand, it opened a space for writers to make the art of both the expanded opportunities and the persistent constraints.¹⁰

Marita Odette Bonner, an African American essayist, and a short-story writer, also regularly published her short stories and plays in *The Crisis*. The dilemmas which New Negro Women had to face were summarized in Bonner’s essay from 1925, titled *On Being Young – a Woman – and Colored*. She focused on her own emotions when being discouraged from studies and her life dream of career, and marriage with mutual respect only for being a woman and woman of colour specifically. Other African Americans, especially those impoverished both economically and socially, felt jealous of her, and she expressed the pressure she felt because of being successful and fulfilling her dreams; she wrote: “All your life you have heard of the debt you owe ‘Your People’ because you have managed to have the things they have not largely had”.¹¹ The role of memory and the collective unconscious, a term introduced by the founder of analytic psychology, Carl Gustav Jung, seems to be essential in African culture and for African Americans as well.

Without the civil rights movement that began in 1954 and brought about changes in politics, society, and the educational system in the 1960s, African American writers would not likely have been noticed or allowed to study at universities. The movement also contributed to the

⁹ FAUSET, Jessie Redmon. *There Is Confusion*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989.

¹⁰ WALL, Cheryl A. Women of The Harlem Renaissance. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 32. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34

diversification of academic programs, the addition of Black Studies and Women's studies, and the institutionalization of African American literature, making the works of African American writers more visible and accessible to American society.¹²

In the 1960s, feminism achieved a new dynamic in the United States due to the foundation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the change of the term 'feminism' into 'women's liberation'. While the biggest themes of the 1960s are self-awareness and self-discovery and the realization that 'black is beautiful', in the 1970s the importance of loving oneself and one's culture is emphasized.¹³ For instance, Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) stresses the necessity of self-love, self-acceptance, and questions the dependence of beauty on cultural affiliation. *The Bluest Eye* portrays the motif of the black community as a certain dichotomy. On one hand, the black community has means to sustain and celebrate itself, on the other, its conscious or unconscious willingness to support and eternalize the racist idea of white being beautiful and superior over blackness destroys the novel's main protagonist, Pecola Breedlove.¹⁴

The ability to define oneself was further developed by an American playwright and poet, Ntozake Shange who experimented with different forms of art and combined drama with poetry. She became famous for her piece concerning the life journeys of seven women suffering oppression in society, the dramatic choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1975). What each of the women comes to realize is that they cannot find love outside of themselves without loving themselves and each other first.¹⁵ Love and romantic relationships in general is a topic that figured prominently in the 1980s and is still popular in contemporary African American literary works.

In the late 1970s, African American female writers come up with a new perspective on the topic of racism against black women that pictures women in the position of rebels who express their disapproval of racism and patriarchy and therefore, voluntarily separate themselves

¹² MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. Introduction. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 2. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

¹³ Ibid., p. 8

¹⁴ WILLIAMS, Dana A. Contemporary African American women writers. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 72. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 74

from such a society. This notion is supported in Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) or in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) in which the main character lives without any moral restraints and with no remorse, even though she sleeps with her best friend's husband, and decides not to live up to the society's expectations and perform the duty of a woman, and that is to become a mother.¹⁶

„Throughout the 1980s and extending to today, romantic relationships in general, not just lesbian relationships, figure prominently in literature by African American women writers. In many ways, this focus on love relationships, coupled with a focus on African American upward mobility, marks the latest phase in contemporary African American women's writing, one which has been dominated by popular culture and one which is oft critiqued.” (Williams, 2009, p. 80)

An American playwright who had the biggest influence on the present-day American theatre, in general, was definitely Suzan-Lori Parks. She works with realistic characters and time-confined situations in her postmodern plays which question and revise presence and also give voices to those traditionally ignored in history, to African American people.¹⁷

In 2002 Parks became the first African American woman to win The Pulitzer Prize for drama, specifically for her play *Topdog/Underdog* (1999) about black brothers named Lincoln and Booth whose parents abandoned them, and they struggle with building their own life. The brothers' names themselves lead to provocation and people's curiosity, as Booth is the surname of an American actor who was a supporter of the Confederacy, strictly rejected the abolition of slavery, and was behind the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln was elected the 16th president of the United States shortly before the Civil war, in 1860. He strongly opposed slavery and in 1862, based on the Emancipation Proclamation, freed all African American slaves in rebel states, especially in the South; two years later The Fugitive Slave Laws were revoked. The fate of the boys in the play mirrors the conflict between Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth over their stance on slavery, except that they are arguing over their parents' \$500 inheritance and the play ends with the death of one of them.

Nalo Hopkinson, Sheree R. Thomas, Virginia Hamilton, and Octavia Butler are names of contemporary African American writers who had a big impact on the literary genre of science

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 74

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 83

fiction and gave it a new perspective. Changing its focus from ideas about futuristic advances in technology, and future society on another planet to the current society on this planet. In 1979, Butler published a book called *Kindred* originally released as fiction including only time travelling, and no scientific features; nevertheless, it convinced critics to expand the boundaries of the science fiction genre and embrace it as an aesthetically rich literary form.¹⁸

The theme which is most frequently discussed in works of female writers, regardless of time, derives from the women's life experience of being oppressed and humiliated. Many of them happened to be enslaved or went through abusive marriages; they also had to face racist comments and different kinds of violent attacks and oppression in their lives. What seems to be the most notable topic is the phenomenon of the so-called double oppression of black women because of being oppressed not only by whites but also by their own husbands who attempt to balance their frustration with the world by gross acts on them. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are well-known magnificent writers whose works among other topics deal with this particular subject.

Alice Walker is an internationally known writer, and activist, born in 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia. She has travelled to many countries spreading the message that not only the rights of people should be recognized, but rather the rights of all living beings. In one of her bestsellers *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) Walker deals with the psychological effect of genital mutilation on women; she later inspired filmmakers to process the topic into a film in the 1990s. In one of the interviews, posted on the New Jersey Performing Arts Center's Youtube channel in 2009, Walker said she listened to many people telling stories about their families and ancestors, she kept finding more information about them and a part of the creation of her epistolary novel *The Color Purple* (1982) was just out of the longing for being more intimate with her ancestors at the time she did not exist. To Walker's surprise, her novel was honoured with The Pulitzer Prize a year after it was released, in 1983, and she became the first African American woman ever to receive this prestigious prize. This novel fully portrays the oppression of women through the journey of the main character Celie who is mistreated and raped by her own father and later by her husband as well.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 84

The Color Purple has much in common with the works of Toni Morrison not that they are the same in form, but most of them deal with similar themes including male dominance, enslavement, childhood trauma, doubting faith, incest, bisexuality, and brutal abusive acts on black people such as lynching, and rape.

TONI MORRISON, HER BIOGRAPHY, AND HER WRITING STYLE

Toni Morrison, original name Chloe Ardelia Wofford, a prominent American novelist, and playwright, was born in Lorain, Ohio in 1931, the decade of her birth was the period characterized by the town's dependence on the steel industry and its settlement by immigrants coming from Mexico, or Europe, and like Morrison's relatives, from the American South. Her grandparents were Southerners, uneducated sharecroppers, unable to read and they lived in times when white people could be arrested for teaching black people to read. Her mother, Ramah, was brought up in the southern country of Alabama and recalled it as a fairy tale land full of ghosts in the woods. On the other hand, the perspective of Morrison's father, George, was very different. He hated the south and considered Georgia, the country he was born into, the most racist state in the USA. He went back only to visit his relatives, by contrast, her mother refused to ever return; Morrison thus acquired two completely different views of life in the south and she later demonstrated in her fiction that exaggerated binary oppositions never capture the complexity of life.¹⁹

She was born into an environment of working-class people of all colours suffering through the Great Depression and stock market crash in 1929 who eventually learned whom to trust, not banks and the economic system, but their community, families, and themselves.²⁰ When she was getting older she listened to people in the neighbourhood and her mother telling stories about their relatives or friends and folk tales from the south and drew inspiration for her novels from her own experience as well. Morrison had always considered herself a partial or fraudulent American and only after she received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, she felt like a proper American citizen probably for the first time.

¹⁹ LI, Stephanie. Early Life and Family. In: *Toni Morrison: a biography*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood Press, c2010, s. 2. Greenwood biographies. ISBN 978-0-313-37839-3.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 1

Memories of Morrison's childhood evoked both distressing and joyful emotions in her, as she stated in the documentary *The Life of Toni Morrison*, released in 2015. She remembered her family had to move from time to time because it was common for people to simply run out of money even when having as many as three jobs. From a very young age, she was devoted to God and was raised to respect and appreciate Black culture and traditions; at the age of 12, she converted to Catholicism and was baptized under the name Anthony after Saint Anthony of Padua.²¹ Nevertheless, not all black people believed in the power of God. One of Morrison's schoolmates questioned the existence of God for she had been praying for blue eyes for two years and got none; Toni used her story as an inspiration and basis for her first novel *The Bluest Eye*.

Toni loved and enjoyed reading books from her childhood and read mainly the classics, during high school studies she was offered a job in a library under the surveillance of a highly respected female teacher. She continued her studies of English at the most prestigious black university in Washington, D.C., Howard University. After getting a bachelor's degree she went on and majored in American literature at Cornell University, where she graduated with a master's degree in 1955. After graduation, she worked as a senior editor at Random House and in 1958 married a Jamaican architect, Harold Morrison; three years later, their first son Harold Ford was born. She started to write her novels in her thirties and shared her passion for writing and literature with others through teaching. In the late 1960s, she gave birth to her second son Slade Kevin, got divorced, and move to New York with her sons to work at Random House headquarters.

While working at Random House headquarters, Morrison was determined to include as many excellent African American writers as possible in the publisher's catalogue and tried to promote the publication of promising and interesting black authors, editing, for example, the autobiography of Muhammad Ali and the novels of Henry Dumas, John McCluskey, and Gail Jones. Nevertheless, the sales were not impressive, except Muhammad Ali's autobiography and Gail Jones books. At one of the sales conference a regional salesman said it was not possible to sell books "on both sides of the street." He meant that white people bought most

²¹ SINGH, Amardeep, ed. Toni Morrison: Biographical Note: Biographical Overview of Toni Morrison's Life and Career. In: *Scalar: Toni Morrison: A Teaching and Learning Resource Collection* [online]. Pennsylvania: Lehigh University's Humanities Lab, 2021, 22 Sept 2022 [cit. 2023-02-25]. Dostupné z: <https://scalar.lehigh.edu/toni-morrison/toni-morrison-biographical-note>

books, blacks fewer, if any at all.²² This statement drove Morrison to think about publishing a book good and attractive enough to demand black people's attention; and that book was *The Black Book*, „an elegant scrapbook of photographs, lyrics, patents of inventions by black people, new clippings, advertising posters—everything about African American history and culture, the awful and horrendous as well as the beautiful and triumphant.” (Morrison, 2017, p. 76)

As a single mother, Morrison had to cope with everything alone. According to Angela Davis, an American writer, activist, and feminist, she lived simultaneously in two very different worlds, the real one where she took care of her sons, provided for them, and worked as an editor, and the other one of her books' characters, perhaps more exciting.

During the 1950s and 1960s, black people actively fought for their civil rights, marching in the streets with banners. Toni also longed for social changes, however, she did not join the voices of the black community on the streets, as an editor, she felt the need and responsibility to preserve those voices and document what was really happening without the distortion by columnists and politicians. In the 1970s, she edited *The Black Book* published by Random House. It became the central book of the Civil Rights Movement containing articles, pictures, and postcards; one of the articles *From the American Baptist: 'A visit to the slave mother who killed her child.'* later served as her inspiration for writing *Beloved*. Additionally, the idea of ghosts of deceased relatives appearing to the living came from stories Morrison heard as a child.

Through writing, Morrison reimagined her own past and with it, that of African American people, and of black women specifically. The unique writing style and the raw description forcing the people who denied slavery to embrace it is what makes Toni Morrison America's foremost novelist. According to Frances Ann Lebowitz, an American literary critic, and writer, Morrison was not an angry person, however, in her novels, anger is omnipresent. Morrison's editor Robert Gottlieb claims the expression of anger in her books is not only related to the general history of black people and to their legitimate reasons for feeling angry because of being humiliated, raped, and lynched, but also to personal experience; he thinks those two

²² MORRISON, Toni. Narrating the Other. In: MORRISON, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Third printing. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017, s. 76. ISBN 978-0-674-97645-0.

aspects cannot be separated from one another. As Susmita Roye puts it, „the disturbed girlhoods of Toni Morrison’s disrupted female characters most powerfully register her angry protest against a gender system that designates a woman a secondary rank and against a social system that effortlessly overlooks what befalls a poor (black) female child.” (Roye, 2012, p. 213)

In 1970, she published her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, which had not met with great success, even the black community disliked the novel for it contained themes of childhood trauma, incest, and abuse, which were simply unbearable for them. Morrison was paid 3,000 USD for the novel and she spent the money on vacation taking her parents and children to Aruba. Morrison’s mother could not believe that people were serving her, she did not have to make her bed or wash her towels for the very first time in her life. Morrison realized that the moment of seeing her mother totally fascinated by being cared for by other people was the greatest benefit of *The Bluest Eye*.

Morrison loved her sons and the writing process more than anything else and had dreamed about spending time only with the children or writing novels in times she had to work long hours at Random House and therefore, did not have much time for her passions. She fulfilled this dream in the 1980s, after publishing *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Tar Baby* (1981), she became self-sufficient and could become a full-time writer.

In 1989 she joined the academic staff at Princeton University, taught literature and writing, and also led a Program in Creative Writing which brought students and acclaimed artists together to work on projects.²³ Morrison Hall, the home of the Department of African American Studies at Princeton University was officially named after this famous writer and teacher who had an indelible impact on the university, in 2017.

In her fiction, she had covered the mother-child relationship several times, but she had no idea that she would have to deal with the loss of a child herself. Before Christmas in 2010, her youngest son Slade Kevin died of pancreatic cancer. He followed in his mother's footsteps and also became an artist, more precisely a musician, and a painter; he even helped his mother with writing books for children which they later published together as co-authors, such as

²³ Toni Morrison. *Department of African American Studies: Princeton University* [online]. Princeton, NJ 08540, 2023 [cit. 2023-01-31]. Dostupné z: <https://aas.princeton.edu/people/toni-morrison>

Little Cloud and Lady Wind (2010), *Peeny Butter Fridge* (2009). Toni Morrison died of complications of pneumonia on August 5, 2019, at the age of 88.

CENTRAL THEMES IN MORRISON'S NOVELS

Morrison sympathized with the romantic idea introduced into the literature in the early 19th century by William Wordsworth who pointed out the need of respecting children as independent-thinking human beings with their own emotions and worldviews no matter what they had been through. Wordsworth, an English poet, emphasized this idea in his famous poem *We Are Seven*, from a collection of lyrical poems, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), written as a dialogue between a child and an adult poet who share their perspectives of death as life's end and misunderstand one another; in fact, the child seems more mature than the poet. Morrison also paid attention to children who longed for being taken seriously and not only just as a member of a certain category, usually that of abused and misused children. Nevertheless, childhood trauma, incest, abuse, questioning faith, racial discrimination, and gender differences are recurring themes not only in Morrison's works but in those of African American female writers of the 1970s literature.

Not only double oppression of black women became the central topic of Morrison's works, but also love; a mother who loves her children, a woman who loves a man, a woman who finally loves herself the way she is. In *Paradise* (1998), the theme of love is further developed in connection with God and faith and provides the reader with two possible attitudes to this subject, the attitude of Reverend Pulliam and that of Reverend Misner. Reverend Pulliam gives a sermon at a wedding saying: „ Love is divine only and difficult always.... You do not deserve love just because you want it....Love is not a gift. It is a diploma. A diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it.... God is not interested in you. He is interested in love and the bliss it brings to those who understand and share that interest.” The counter to that view of God is articulated by Reverend Misner for whom love is “unmotivated respect”, he says: „ God loved the way humans loved one another; loved the way humans loved themselves; loved the genius on the cross who managed to do both and die knowing it.... The cross he held was abstract; the absent body was real, but both combined to pull humans from backstage to the spotlight, from muttering in the wings to the principal role in the story of their lives. This execution made it possible to respect – freely, not

in fear – one’s self and one another.”²⁴ Respect is seen as a key aspect related to love and intimacy in all of Morrison’s works.

The following chapters deal with the central themes of Morrison’s novels separately, namely race, and racism as such and its role in her works, issues of gender differences, the roles of men and women in society, migration and slavery and its impact on black people in relation to historical facts and Morrison's attitude.

Race and racism

Racism is the hostility of one ethnic group against another and is also often described as a belief in natural inequality between individuals or groups based on their physical and intellectual differences. It is an omnipresent phenomenon that destroys and interferes with many people’s lives with its roots going back to distant history. The beginnings of racism can be traced back to the Middle Ages when two different ideas were promoted; the first was called pigmentocracy meaning white supremacy allowing white people to enslave those they considered inferior, and the second concerned anti-Judaism, a religiously motivated opposition of a majority Christian society to a minority Jewish religious group.

The fact of Jesus being displayed as a white man, when the historians already know he had to be dark-skinned because of where he lived and who his parents were, is quite paradoxical. This approach of depicting God as a white human being carrying similar features to those of modern humans appears in all Western cultures believing in the Christian concept, but the particular idea varies from country to country based on the differences that arose in the course of evolution. Not all white people look the same, slight differences can be seen when comparing people living in Scandinavia to those living in the Balkan Peninsula. The Rev. Walter Arthur McCray clarified the origin of modern people and answered the question of the race of God in a book called *The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering the Black and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations* (1989).²⁵

²⁴ MORRISON, Toni. Configurations of Blackness. In: MORRISON, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Third printing. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017, s. 69-72. ISBN 978-0-674-97645-0.

²⁵ MCCRAY, Walter Arthur. In: *The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering the Black and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nation*. Teacher ed edition. Chicago (Illinois): Black Light Fellowship, 1995, s. 110. ISBN 978-0933176232.

„The preponderance of contemporary evidence being gathered by archaeologists and ancient historians says that Africa (Egypt’s Nile Valley) was the origination of humanity and civilization. It was from here that humanity, and indigenous “black” humanity, had its beginnings. The preponderance of archaeological and historical facts say that the roots of all people are in Africa! —Egypt, Africa. Whether one holds to the traditional view of a Mesopotamian origination of humanity, or to a more substantiated view of the origination of humanity in Africa, one point of harmony is certain: indigenous humanity and the originators of the civilizations in each of these areas were black! They were black in Egyptian Africa and there were black in Asia’s lower Mesopotamia! Either way one cuts it, the originators of civilization were black people.” (McCray, 1995, p. 110)

According to McCray, historians and archaeologists agree that Africa, Egypt, and Mesopotamia must have been the cradle of the first civilizations in the world inhabited by black people, and thanks to the evidence obtained by long-term research, they are convinced that even Jesus Christ must have had dark-skinned parents and therefore be black himself.

The superiority or inferiority of a particular race has appeared constantly in the past for some people always felt like members of a supreme race because of their eye colour, skin colour, faith, traditions, or behaviour. Such convictions often led them to terrible actions, for instance, the genocide of Jews carried out by Nazis in the 1940s by which they meant to create a better world full of the chosen people – members of the Aryan race who were considered superhumans possessing qualities other people lacked. From a scientific point of view, the distinction between physical and psychological features is related to the evolution of the geographical and climatic conditions under which the human organism develops and the adaptations it had to make in order to survive in such a changing environment. The theory of evolution is true not only for humans but for all living creatures on earth which had to adjust to the changes, otherwise, they die out.

In North America the division of people into individual races arose on the basis of their origin; the essential purpose was to separate the original settlers, so-called Native Americans, from people coming mainly from England in the early 17th century; later in the 18th and 19th century to separate those settlers from migrants and slaves from different parts of the world, primarily from Africa. However, people belonging to the white race always felt superior to others and created some sort of hierarchy, or structure. This structuring system of people’s opportunities

functioning even nowadays affects their lives in quite a lot of areas, like job offers, opportunities for education, housing, entertainment, and free decision-making. But these aspects developed in history in relation to laws and events which impacted all people's lives, not just those of people of colour; for instance the beginning of slavery in the early 17th century and its abolition in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln who issued the Emancipation Proclamation and thus freed all slaves in an attempt to end the Civil War (1861-1865), also the processes and events in the background of people's fight for their civil rights, the recognition of women and their right to vote. The differences in cultural traditions also brought complications and problems to members of a minority race, which is true not only in America but throughout the world.

The psychology of American racism

The American Psychological Association regularly publishes articles dealing among other topics with racism, its origin, its impact on people, and how to promote antiracism. In the article from 2021 titled *The Psychology of American Racism* Steven O. Roberts and Michael T. Rizzo claim that racism is as American as an apple pie and that it was constructed by and maintained in American society by Americans themselves. They admit the role of historical conflicts as well and point out seven factors contributing to the perpetuation of racism in America, mainly categories, i.e., organizing people into groups according to their skin colour; segregation hindering intergroup contact; hierarchy, primarily the opportunities arising from social status; the power of the government and institutions, media idealizing White Americans and minimizing people of colour, and passive approach to racism. They also mention the interactive relations between the particular factors because media often distorts these racial categories, segregation reflects hierarchy, and power enables passivism.²⁶

The problem with categories starts in primary school education where children are taught about specific things through generic labels for it helps them develop expectations about the groups, however, it additionally promotes a descriptive-to-prescriptive tendency in the children, which means understanding the way the specific group works as an example of how its members should act. The pitfall of such a tendency is that children do not learn to see

²⁶ Roberts, S. O., & Rizzo, M. T. (2021). The psychology of American racism. *American Psychologist*, 76(3), 475–487. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000642>

individual group members as unique human beings, thereby reinforcing the formation of prejudices about entire groups.²⁷

The segregation of people is closely related to the structure of the American population, in which whites predominate making up 77% of the total population, and therefore lack interracial contact with Latin, Black, Asian, or Native Americans which leads the white people to feel anxious, insecure, and having pessimistic prejudices about people of colour. The hierarchical order of society can be found in all societies across the world's countries and is usually defined by social status. The American society consists of White Americans from three quarters, and they also occupy positions of the highest status and can easily access power, moreover, 98% of past U.S. Presidents were white as well. The basics of the hierarchical order of American society root in history and are kept in policies, which often makes it significantly more difficult for people of colour to enter the U.S. and obtain the status of American for in most cases they have to face a denial as immigrants or refugees.²⁸ Another crucial aspect is the depiction of God in America as white which makes adults and children evaluate white people as leadership worthy and keep prioritizing them in case of job offers or elections.

From several pieces of research concerning the influence of the media on children's behaviour, it is evident that they imitate and internalize the specific kind of behaviour and values presented on TV. When it comes to racial portrayals, viewers are statistically far more likely to see blacks as perpetrators and whites as victims, such depiction can further foster the racist approach of people. Additionally, racial minorities are misrepresented or underrepresented in children's media as well which naturally leads them to perceive people of colour as poor and dangerous, and therefore avoid contact with them.²⁹ The media was an essential source of information about racial minorities even before. In the early 20th century, especially for people from the lower classes, for whom literature was not available, the only option left was to see theatrical performances which mainly concerned the lives of black people or rather white actors' ideas about how black people lead their lives.

The essay on the psychological consequences of American racism further defines three routes to a passive approach to it. One of them is built through ignorance, the second one through

²⁷ Ibid., p. 477

²⁸ Ibid., p. 479

²⁹ Ibid., p. 482

denial, and the third, possibly the worst option, through the observation of inaction in others. People ignoring or denying the existence of racism are often those unfamiliar with historical events and the existence of racism in the past. Nowadays, even Black Americans are more likely than ever to refuse to accept racism as a major problem in U.S. society which makes the support of antiracist policies even more complicated. The third case is related to the phenomenon of the “bystander effect” meaning the observation of inaction in people in emergencies. The essay offers three psychological factors of what might trigger such acting in people. First, the feeling of less responsibility in the presence of other people, second, evaluation apprehension, i.e., the fear of being judged negatively, and third, questioning of the emergency status of the situation if no one is helping, i.e., pluralistic ignorance.³⁰

Gender

The following chapter will focus on the differences between men and women, their typical roles in society, and also on aspects of womanhood and motherhood, which are recurring themes in Morrison's novels.

Gendered differences

The perception of gender and mutual relationships between men and women and its consequences on a person's life has changed significantly throughout the history and development of mankind. The direction in which the development of this concept went was strongly influenced at first by the climatic conditions, when men sought food by hunting and therefore had to leave their homes regularly, while women, on the other hand, took care of their offspring in their dwellings. Later, it mainly depended on the culture and religion of the given territory, which influenced or dictated the role of the given gender in society.

Currently, in most developed countries, there is a high tolerance for both sexes, especially for women, who have repeatedly fought throughout history for their rights, dignity, and recognition. However, even today there is an effort to control women's bodies and their lives, for example by banning them from abortion. Moreover, violence against women is still going on in developing countries, and many families are driven by their poor living conditions to

³⁰ Ibid., p. 483

enter into child marriages in order to obtain, for example, livestock that will enable them to survive.

The traditional roles of the separate genders depend on the discourse of the particular country and its culture. In the familiar discourse of patriarchy, maternity is projected as woman's biological destiny, as well as her assigned role in society.³¹ According to the Bible, having children and thus an heir meant the favour of fate and a successful life, on the other hand, infertility or the death of an heir signified the misfortune of fate, as for example in the story of Job, who lost his children.

As for the discourse of feminism, promoted by Alice Walker and Barbara Christian, the women's experiences of maternity differ in terms of their cultural locations and „the space of the maternal accommodates contrary elements such as victimhood and empowerment, submission and authority, creativity and destructiveness.” (Chakravarty, 2004, p. 14) According to these black feminists, the idea of motherhood contains both repressive and emancipatory potential.

Morrison crosses the line between genders in *Beloved* where she presents maternity not only in the biological sense, but rather as „love, connectedness, communication and nurture, a role not confined to women alone, as Paul D's caring attitude to Sethe reminds us.”(Chakravarty, 2004, p. 17)

Men and women differ naturally, not only in their body structure and personality traits, but also in the purpose of their lives, their roles in society, and mostly in the way they were and/or are treated by other people. African people brought to America as slaves were treated very poorly by the slave traders and later by their owners. The horrible working conditions and differences in the behaviour of owners towards slaves according to the gender of the slave will be described later in chapter on migration and slavery, using specific examples from Morrison's novels.

When being interviewed on *Beloved* in 1988, Morrison described the different responses of men and women to despair using the example on Margaret Garner's story. She emphasizes the contrast between the sexes in life-threatening situations and suicides saying: fathers

³¹ CHAKRAVARTY, Radha. Lethal Love and Haunted Houses: The maternal problematic in Toni Morrison. *BRAC University Journal*. Delhi University, India, 2004, 1(2), 13.

always take everyone with them, but mothers commit suicide and leave their children alive. From this fact she assumed that Garner must have been really desperate and had no choice but to kill her children.

As for the African American male and female writers, their perception of reality and their perspectives is what distinguishes them from each other. According to African American literary critic Blyden Jackson, who inventoried and assessed the world of black literature in 1968, there was a very noticeable lack of a view that looks at reality not only from the outside and in contrast with the life of whites, but also from the inside, from the very centre of the family and the black community.³² As Josef Jařab puts it, who but a black woman could offer such a view with greater conviction, in more concrete and richer detail? While men were traditionally driven away from homes by the desire for self-realization or personal or social frustrations, for women the family hearth remained the centre of existence, a guarantee of survival in the everyday life as well as in historical continuity. He also emphasizes that not the frontier between the white and black worlds, but the home in the broadest sense of the word has always represented the primary environment for the birth and revival of black culture.³³

According to Jařab, among Toni Morrison's novels, feminist moods are most clearly reflected in her second novel, published in 1973, *Sula*, where the protagonist defies what tradition expects of her, that as a woman she will live for others rather than for herself. In the end, Sula becomes a victim of her own revolt, not because the environment, which considers her marked by the forces of mysterious evil, is right, but because she herself has not found a centre around which she could grow, build her human and even personal identity.³⁴

When discussing Morrison's third book *Song of Solomon* in an interview for WTTW in 1977, the author said that when the idea of this book came to her mind, she could not use just female characters anymore. Her previous novels such as *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* reflect a closed space in which the characters' lives take place. However, this novel being about both freedom and escape, abandonment, and triumph, had to be about men to fully explicate the main idea. Morrison said she had struggled with being intimate with a man character for she

³² JAŘAB, Josef. Poezie a krutost nečitankové skutečnosti. In: HILSKÝ, M. a J. ZELENKA, ed. *Od Poea k postmodernismu*. Praha: Odeon, 1993, s. 490-491. Vlastní překlad do angličtiny.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

had not done it before; she had explored what it was really like to think about dominion and power which she had felt rather alien to and fearful to go deeply inside.

Womanhood, motherhood

Morrison also highlighted womanhood and motherhood, which could be seen as related concepts as both require unconditional love to one's self or to others. The theme of self-discovery and self-love both associated with womanhood were elaborated by Morrison in her latest novel, *God Help the Child*, in which the main protagonist, Bride, is forced to build her own identity and find a way to love herself, because not only, did she get little of it from her own parents, but Bride's mother even made her call her 'Sweetness'.

Mother's unconditional love to her children could be questioned in *God Help the Child*, for Sweetness, paradoxically to the semantic meaning of her name, treats her daughter cruelly and refuses even to touch her in order to prepare her fragile soul for the racist world out there. Despite her difficult childhood, Bride eventually accepts her unique look and further emphasizes it by wearing white clothing that accentuates her very dark skin and loves herself, which is unfortunately not true about the main protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, who believes she is pretty ugly, because she does not have blue eyes or even the bluest ones, and therefore deserves to be mistreated by the people around her, including her abusive father.

The most shocking portrayal of motherhood and mother's unconditional love to her children is definitely offered in *Beloved*. The novel shows the sacrifice a mother must make in order to protect her children from the fate she herself had, regardless of the consequences of her actions. This key motif of the novel will be elaborated in chapter on slavery and the separate chapter concerning the analysis of *Beloved*.

In Morrison's novels the stories of the murderous mothers guilty of killing their offspring, the most callous and unnatural act of which a woman could be thought capable³⁵, are presented in order to show what tormented choices women must make at specific moments in their lives for they are, after all, „fictions constructed out of specific cultural and personal anxieties.“ (Chakravarty, 2004, p. 17)

³⁵ CHAKRAVARTY, Radha. Lethal Love and Haunted Houses: The maternal problematic in Toni Morrison. *BRAC University Journal*. Delhi University, India, 2004, 1(2), 14.

In *Sula*, readers are provided with an extraordinary depiction of femininity and identity building, for the protagonist chooses to go against the traditional role of women and society's expectations by sleeping with her best friend's husband, not becoming a mother, and not acting like a decent, yet obedient and non-confrontational woman just like Nel, her best friend. In this novel, a reader may notice yet another aspect of womanhood and the interrelationships between women in the way Nel and Sula get along with one another again at the very moment Sula is near death and Nel comes to visit her and finally forgives her for the affair with her husband. The reader could feel how strong the bond of this female friendship is, a motif that Morrison uses in some of her other novels, like that of the MacTeer girls and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* described closely later in the chapter concerning the analysis of *The Bluest Eye*.

Most of the female characters in Morrison's novels experience the phenomenon of 'double oppression' but react to it based on their own unique personality. In *The Bluest Eye*, the reader can recognize the friendship and bond between Pecola and the MacTeer sisters which may be helpful and supportive in their fight against racist comments, attacks, and the racist world in general. Sula, as an untamed woman, on the other hand, experiments with her life and acts thoughtlessly without any regard for the consequences.

Migration and slavery

The Great Migration, its causes and consequences have already been covered in the chapter on Harlem Renaissance and New Negro Movement, resulting in the mass voluntary or forced migration of people from southern to the northern and western parts of the North American continent. Nevertheless, black people had to move from place to place even earlier in history; throughout the 18th and 19th century accordingly to the decisions their owners had made for them, and even in the 20th century because of not having enough money to pay the rent or having to face racist attacks on daily basis.

The migration of people as well as slavery are concepts closely related to money and wealth, as Morrison says „virtually all personal problems and government policies twist and coil around money.” She entitles money the 'not-so-secret mistress of all our lives' which she

explains and justifies by being constantly in our minds if it has not already seduced us.³⁶ The origins of the accumulation of wealth are bloody and profoundly cruel, involving as it always and invariably does war.³⁷ According to Morrison, the price of wealth, historically, has been blood, annihilation, death, and despair which are, in fact, the defining aspects of slavery.³⁸

African American, thus black people could not read, so they had no choice but to rely on oral tradition of black culture and shared stories about their ancestors with one another. They got to know about the horrible treatment of many people even during the 20th century, in which those people were no longer held as slaves, most importantly they heard the story about a black man named Isaac Woodard from 1946. Morrison retells his story in *The Origin of Others*:

„Isaac Woodard, a black veteran still in uniform was on his way to North Carolina to join his family, he travelled by bus and asked the driver to stop in order for him to use the restroom, they argued, but he was allowed to use the facilities. Later, the bus driver called the police to remove Sergeant Woodard. The chief, Linwood Shull, took him to a nearby alleyway where he and a number of other policemen beat him with their nightsticks; then they took him to jail and arrested him for disorderly conduct. During his night in jail, the chief of police beat Woodard with a billy club and gouged out his eyes. Woodard was sent before the local judge, who found him guilty and fined him fifty dollars. Woodard asked for medical care and two days later it arrived. Meantime not knowing where he was and suffering from mild amnesia, he was taken to a hospital in Aiken, South Carolina... He lived, though blind, until 1992, when he died at age seventy-three. After thirty minutes of deliberation, Chief Shull was acquitted of all charges, to the wild applause of an all-white jury.” (Morrison, 2017, p. 59-61)

For the purpose of protecting themselves from the threat represented by the whites, the black people founded a number of all-black towns where they could feel safer and accepted for they fled to “free” land and established their own hierarchy of colour, ranking the deepest black—“blue black”—skin as a definitive mark of acceptability.” (Morrison, 2017, p. 64) The founders of black towns were motivated by the fear of the possibility of being brutally beaten for no reason as Isaac Woodard and also established this colour coding among blacks so that they

³⁶ MORRISON, Toni. The Price of Wealth, the Cost of Care. In: MORRISON, Toni. *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations*. London: Vintage Publishing, 2019, s. 49. ISBN 9781529110883.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 50

³⁸ Ibid., p. 51

are not turned away by members of their own race. The all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma in Morrison's *Paradise* symbolizes this so-called free land, where there is "nothing to serve a traveler: no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital."³⁹

The life in the southern states had almost nothing in common with that in the northern parts of the continent belonging to the Union, especially in terms of slavery. In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed by the United States Congress; it required that slaves who managed to escape their owners even to a free state of the Union had to be returned to them and the government was then responsible for dealing with the issue, i.e., finding, returning, and trying the runaway slaves. Margaret Garner's story, which will be described in detail later in this thesis, resembles this scenario of a runaway slave and was published in the *American Baptist* on February 12, 1856.

Whether to maintain or abolish slavery was the main conflict that contributed to the outbreak of the American Civil war between the Union and the Confederacy, lasting from 1861 to 1865. On January 31, 1865, the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery passed by the U.S. Congress, however, it only ended chattel slavery, i.e., slavery in which an individual is considered the personal property of another.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, as the excerpt about Sergeant Woodard and a number of characters in the literary works of Southern Literature, such as Crooks in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) or Tom Robinson in Nelle Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) suggests, mutual dislike, disgust, and resentment of whites and blacks as well as the feeling of either superiority or inferiority, recurred in the literary works of the 20th and even 21st century.

In 1851 a southern physician and slaveholder Samuel Cartwright wrote *Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race* claiming that,, the black blood distributed to the brain chains the mind to ignorance, superstition and barbarism, and bolts the door against civilization, moral culture and religious truth."(Morrison, 2017, p. 4) He further pointed to two major illnesses of black people, and black enslaved people specifically; one of them is labelled

³⁹ MORRISON, Toni. Configurations of Blackness. In: MORRISON, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Third printing. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017, s. 64. ISBN 978-0-674-97645-0.

⁴⁰ SPENCER, Simeon. Emancipation on the Ballot: Why Slavery is Still Legal in America – And How Voters Can Take Action. *Legal Defense Fund* [online]. New York: NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, c2023, 18 Oct 2022 [cit. 2023-02-25]. Dostupné z: <https://www.naacpldf.org/13th-amendment-emancipation/>

'drapetomania' which makes slaves run away from their owners and the second one he named as 'dysaesthesia aethiopica' to which slaveholders referred to as 'rascality' meaning to be like a person half asleep.⁴¹

Slavery negatively affected the lives of African Americans in particular; they had to tolerate being looked upon as inferior by whites and accept their withdrawn manner of behaviour or cruel treatment without any respect or compassion for them as human beings. As described in chapter 3.1 on race and racism, the main use and mission of black slaves was hard labour on farms and plantations, and their faces were used to entertain whites. So, it rarely happened that a picture of a black person appeared, for example, in a newspaper. This fact is confirmed by an excerpt from *Beloved* when Stamp Aid brings a newspaper clipping to Paul D.

„He had made up his mind to show hip this piece of paper—newspaper—with a picture drawing of a woman who favored Sethe except that was not her mouth.... He simply looked at the face, shaking his head no. No....Because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear. A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob. Nor it was there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper.” (Morrison, 2016, p.183)

As for African American people who mostly found themselves enslaved and are central characters of Morrison's novels, their fate varied depending on their gender. Women had to work as housewives for their owners, usually of white skin, who took advantage of them being in the house and raped and beat them whenever they felt like it. Male slaves, on the other hand, used to perform hard labour on the plantations and were beaten and lynched just to entertain other white people. Even after the abolition of slavery, black men had to face accusations of rape and many other crimes for American society still saw them as simply dangerous people, criminals and constantly suspected them.

⁴¹ MORRISON, Toni. Romancing Slavery. In: MORRISON, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Third printing. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017, s. 5. ISBN 978-0-674-97645-0.

In this excerpt from *Paradise*, Morrison shows the hatred that blacks felt towards their owners who seemed entitled to everything just to enjoy themselves. Black women preferred not to become housewives just to prevent their owners from repeatedly raping them and not caring for white children instead of their own, for whom they had little time left.

„They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a whiteman’s kitchen or nursed a white child. Although field labor was harder and carried no status, they believed the rape of women who worked in white kitchens was if not a certainty a distinct possibility—52 neither of which they could bear to contemplate. So they exchanged that danger for the relative safety of brutal work.“ (Morrison, 1998, *Paradise*, “Seneca”)

In *The Origin of Others*, Morrison introduces a life story of a young upper-class Englishman, Thomas Thistlewood, who set out to make his fortune first as an overseer and then as an owner of slaves in the 18th century.

„...Thistlewood kept a minutely detailed diary minus reflection or sustained judgement, just the facts. Events, encounters with other people, weather, negotiations, prices, losses, all of which either interested him or he felt required notation. He noted the time of sexual encounters too, the level of their satisfaction, the frequency of the acts, and prominently, the place where it happened for which he used Latin terms: *Sup. Lect.* for “on the bed”; *Sup. Terr.* for “on the ground”; *In Silva* for “in the woods”; *In Mag. or Parv. Dom.* for “in the great” or “small room”. These days, I suppose, we would call it rape; those days it was called *droit du seigneur*, right of the lord.“ (Morrison, 2017, p. 7-9)

Slave narrative as a literary genre

Slave narrative was first introduced and defined as a literary genre in 1946 by Marion Wilson Starling, who studied it and wrote her dissertation work that became her vast book titled *The Slave Narrative*. The books, pamphlets, and serial articles concerning antislavery autobiographies from the early nineteenth century arguably share most features with the neoslave narratives published in the late twentieth century and even afterward.⁴²

⁴² MOODY, Joycelyn. African American women and the United States slave narrative. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 109. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

Traditionally, antebellum and other pre-emancipation narratives of slaves were usually „dictated by both male and female former, free(d), fugitive, or bound slaves... to verify both the existence of the slave whose life is recounted and the authenticity of the slave narrative attributed to him or her; scenes of physical and psychological torture and deprivation; depictions of grueling labor; the sale and separation of slave families and further assaults on their integrity; descriptions of both the narrator’s own and other slaves’ sufferings; yearnings for literacy.” (Moody, 2009, p. 110)

From the early 1800s, white owners of slaves persistently questioned the authority of slave narratives and rejected their truthfulness. As Moody stated, this criticism of the accuracy and credibility of slave narratives laid the foundation for the myth of Africans as inherently unreliable as truth-tellers and even incapable of not prevaricating.⁴³ Most blacks were illiterate and had to dictate their stories to whites to record, however, these whites and other abolitionists took advantage of those black people by not actually representing their own words or stories but instead creating fictions to threaten and thwart the political and economic power of southern slaveholding states.⁴⁴

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison exposes to the readers how white officers and wealthy people often took advantage of blacks’ illiteracy and stole their property by making them sign documents they could not read and verify.

Slavewomen’s narrative

White Americans, even those opposing slavery, failed to accept women of African descent as reliable narrators and underestimated their writing skills. Black women and their amanuenses then knew that „auto/biographies by or about blacks were more likely than not to be read with distrust and disbelief – in their authenticity and authority, in their verity and veracity – they had to „construct serious earnest texts that would engage curious Other readers and, furthermore, to construct those Others as trusting rather than resisting readers.” (Moody, 2009, p. 111) The fundamental goal of the slave narratives written by female former slaves

⁴³ Ibid, p. 111

⁴⁴ Ibid.

was to control, shape, alter, and transform the ways free people thought about this specific period of the American history.⁴⁵

To stop the whites' production of racist stereotypes of black women as „primitive barbarians, beasts of burden, slave breeders, indulgent mammies, sex-hungry Jezebels, or tragic mulattas” in the antebellum era was the main objective of the slavewomen's truthful narratives and testimonies.⁴⁶ Slave narratives written by both, male and female writers, also include details of the attempts to escape slavery and the emotions connected with such act, mainly anxiety and despair.⁴⁷

The black African American women wanted to retell their stories and stress their ability to cope with the brutal treatment to validate the false claim that they are not to be afforded the same civil and human rights as white people, and white women specifically, and thus prove to whites that they are not subhuman, but human and female.⁴⁸ „Black women collaborated with their amanuenses – white and black, male and female – to use their life stories to assert black women's humanity and also to expose the ways they were subjugated on the basis of both race and gender.” (Moody, 2009, p. 119)

In the 18th and 19th century, the idea arose that the life of a slave was equal to the life of its owner, for theoretically, „slaves were by definition either naturally devoid or legally dispossessed of a life apart from their masters' – or both.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the evidence of interiority and humanity in the slavewomen's narratives prove that they led „meaningful, worthy lives, and they had the intelligence and skill to translate those lives into powerful rhetoric.”⁵⁰ In addition, Nellie McKay underlines the strong female bond existing with their forebears which invests them with the power to resist, survive, and transcend their own oppression.⁵¹ „Harriet Jacobs announces at the beginning of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that she wants her book to rally the free (white) women of the North to work on behalf of their enslaved sisters in the South.” (Moody, 2009, p. 121) This statement refers to the specific

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 113

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 110

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 119

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 114

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ GATES, JR., Henry Louis, ed. Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology. In: MCKAY, Nellie Y. *The Souls of Black Women Folk in the Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois*. New York: Meridian, 1990, s. 232.

collective bond that women share with each other, which is also a characteristic of femininity that seems to have been born throughout history, mainly due to the need to unite in the fight for women's rights.

In this autobiography Jacobs, a former slave and a mother, argues about the question of morality and humanity condemning slavery as „a system so vicious it could not but corrupt the basic instincts for morality and virtue of those bound under it.” In her opinion, blacks possess a greater sense of virtue and morality than whites and she further supports her claim by demonstrating the fact that whites held blacks in bondage with apparent impunity and blacks generally hated the institution.⁵²

Morrison also dealt with the theme of morality and asked herself: who is more inhuman? How hard they work to define the slave as inhuman, savage, when in fact the definition of the inhuman describes overwhelmingly the punisher, i.e., the slave's owner.⁵³ She gives an example drawn from Mary Prince's memoir *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831) to remind people of the human cost of free slave labour that earned profit for the owner. The following excerpt outlines the reality of working in salt mines which Morrison compares to sadism.

„I was given a half barrel [to be filled with salt] and shovel, and had to stand up to my knees in the water, from four o'clock in the morning till nine, when we were given some Indian corn boiled in water. ... We worked through the heat of the day ... the sun ...raising salt blisters. ...Our feet and legs, from standing in the water for so many hours, soon became full of dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to very bone. ... We slept in a long shed, divided into narrow slips, like the stalls used for cattle.” (Morrison, 2017, p. 27)

As Frances Smith Foster asserts about Harriet Jacobs, the struggle of enslaved women for self-determination “was a battle fought less on physical level than on intellectual, emotional, and spiritual planes.”⁵⁴ However, in *Incidents*, Jacobs proclaims that “Slavery is terrible for men;

⁵² MOODY, Joycelyn. African American women and the United States slave narrative. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 115. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

⁵³ MORRISON, Toni. Being or Becoming the Stranger. In: MORRISON, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Third printing. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017, s. 29. ISBN 978-0-674-97645-0.

⁵⁴ FOSTER, Frances Smith. *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993, p. 103.

but it is far more terrible for women.” (Jacobs, 1861, p. 119) She emphasizes the key gendered difference between slaves, which is primarily the biological experience of reproduction, details of which tend to recur in women’s narratives, such as the experience of childbirth and motherhood, rape, breeding, and concubinage.⁵⁵

On one hand, pregnancy could make the women less likely to be hired out by their owners as labourers, on the other, according to Jonathan D. Martin, author of *Divided Mastery*, „some women seem to have become pregnant deliberately in an effort to control for whom they worked (or did not work) and whether they could remain with their families and loved ones rather than to be loaned or traded away from them, for example.”⁵⁶ As Mattie Jane Jackson, an African American author, tells in a book *Story*, her mother Ellen Turner Jackson Brown Adams, tried to leave more than just one slave owner, but she failed in that quest for she was weighed down by the physical burden of her children.⁵⁷

The twentieth century novels also fall into the genre of slave narrative and their writers borrow heavily from the experiences of their ancestors, possibly mothers, and from the goals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century slavewomen’s narratives. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988), and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* are three highly acclaimed innovative novels influenced by older slave women’s narratives.⁵⁸

Neoslave narrative

A series of novels published in the second half of the twentieth century were defined by a number of scholars as „neoslave narratives, revisit and revise the major conventions, tropes, and themes of the earliest slavewomen’s narratives.”⁵⁹ Maya Angelou (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1970), Gayl Jones (*Corregidora*, 1975), Sherley Anne Williams (*Dessa Rose*, 1987),

⁵⁵ MOODY, Joycelyn. African American women and the United States slave narrative. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 118. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

⁵⁶ MARTIN, Jonathan D. *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South*. Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 55-56.

⁵⁷ MOODY, Joycelyn. African American women and the United States slave narrative. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 118. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125

Nancy Rawles (*My Jim*, 2004), and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987) are authors who self-consciously acknowledge their debt to the enslaved and ex-slave black women who came before them.⁶⁰

The genesis of Beloved

When speaking to Mavis Nicholson in 1988 about *Beloved*, Morrison claimed she did not want to write about slavery at first, because the theme was too awful to her, and she felt she did not have enough emotional, intellectual, and artistic resources to dwell on that period. However, when she ended up in the era of slavery, she had been dragged there by the force of the ideas and the characters she had invented, even though it had been a painful experience for her. She stated that she thought, „well, if they lived it, then maybe I could spend a few years simply writing it.”⁶¹

In the same interview from 1988, she narrates the story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman, who had managed to run away to a free state along with her four children, however, at that time, a slave owner could enter the free territory and take them back, and the law was controversial. A month, or so, after she had gotten to a free territory, the man did come for her, and when she saw him, she instantly ran out to kill those children, she wounded two, cut the throat of a third, and was about to bash the head of the fourth into the wall when they caught her and imprisoned her. The story was haunting Morrison, because „Margaret was not an exhausted mother, it was not contempt for the children and when being interviewed Garner said that her children will not live the way she had and that she felt was better.”

She was fascinated by Garner’s extraordinary story but did not dare to judge her. According to Morrison, the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed, which served for her as an inspiration for her own novel in which the spirit of the dead daughter returns in order to claim what she has been robbed of, mother’s love and life. She also returns to accuse her asking, „how do you know that it is better for me? Since you’ve never died. Maybe, it isn’t. No one else is in the position to ask that question.”

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Toni Morrison interview. American Author. Award winning. Mavis on Four. 1988. In: Youtube [online]. Mavis on Four, 1988 [cit. 2022-12-16]. Dostupné z: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAqB1SgVaC4>.

Mavis Nicholson, who speaks to Morrison in that interview then understands, why she brought this daughter, named Beloved, back. She appears like a ghost, but the interpretation of her look is open; Morrison sees Beloved possibly as a person as well, as she puts it,, the evidence is there, that she is a traumatized survivor of slave ship, the language she speaks is a language of someone who indeed may very well have remembered what that was like, and it is the language of death too.”

In *The Origin of Others*, Morrison describes the way in which African American women lived and were treated in slavery on the example of an article concerning Margaret Garner’s terrible story. The observations in that article that caught Morrison’s attention were: 1) the mother-in-law’s inability to condemn or approve the infanticide; and 2) Margaret Garner’s serenity.⁶²

„She states that she has been a faithful servant; and in her old age she would not have attempted to obtain her liberty; but as she became feeble and less capable of performing labor, her master became more and more exacting and brutal in his treatment, until she could stand it no longer; that the effort could only result in death, at most—she therefore made an attempt. She witnessed the killing of the child, but said she neither encouraged nor discouraged her daughter-in-law—for under similar circumstances she would probably have done the same.” (Morrison, 2017, p. 80)

Garner’s mother did not judge her daughter’s actions because of being a mother and loving her children too, she probably understood the psychological process behind killing one’s own children in order to prevent the whites from selling them to slavery for she herself lived in slavery most of her lifetime.

The reflection of African culture in literature

African cultural heritage is rooted in faith and beliefs, namely belief in the afterlife, magic itself and magical reality; therefore, many African American writers incorporate elements of magical realism into their works, involving the transfer of the traditions of African culture to the life in the black American community.

The black people’s belief in God and Christianity was strongly questioned in relation to slavery. In slave narratives and in the slave women’s spiritual autobiographies specifically, the

⁶² MORRISON, Toni. Narrating the Other. In: MORRISON, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Third printing. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017, s. 81. ISBN 978-0-674-97645-0.

narrators often oppose slavery „as an institutional violation of secular, sociopolitical civil and human rights and as an offense against the teachings of the Christian Gospel.” (Moody, 2009, p. 120) Harriet Jacobs ironically seized upon the emphasis of Christianized morality tales of virgins in distress and virtue under siege to dramatize and protest the sexual aggression and violence that enslaved women had to endure.⁶³ To thwart slave owners' sexual dominance over the bodies of their female slaves, the women resisted reproduction by covertly practicing African forms of contraception and abortion, and some of them desperately took their children's lives through infanticide, as in the case of Margaret Garner.⁶⁴

In Ntozake Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), a young girl named Indigo believes in the existence of the 'reality of the unreal' where magic happens, and rituals can rectify almost anything. Indigo is fed up with her mother because she always mentions white folks who are telling her what to do, that she can't go somewhere, and she can't do some things. Indigo reacts to it angrily that she did not make up white folks and does not understand what they get to do with her, given the fact that she is not white.⁶⁵ Whiteness is in Shange's novel immediately associated with limitations on black freedom and desire.

Indigo could be perceived as the embodiment of pure African faith and culture, uncorrupted by white intervention as well as her uncle John who explains to her the concept of the unreal that can be traced to the time when slaves used musical instruments to speak for them: “[White folks] was thinkin' that if we didn't have nothin' of our own, they could come controllin', meddlin', whippin' our sense on outta us. But the Colored smart, ya see. The Colored got some wits to em, you & me, we ain't the onliest ones be talkin' wit the unreal. What ya think music is, whatchu think the blues be, & them get happy church musics is about, but talkin' wit the unreal what's mo' real than most folks ever gonna know.” (Shange, 1982, p. 27)

Music always played a key role in the African people's lives, especially in the lives of former slaves who were given orders that they could not oppose or disobey. Dancing and jazz

⁶³ MOODY, Joycelyn. African American women and the United States slave narrative. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 120. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 122

⁶⁵ FRANCIS, Angela J. Searching for Rhythm and Freedom: African American Magical Realism and the Creation of a Home Country. In: SANDÍN, Lyn Di Iorio a Richard PEREZ. *Moments of magical realism in U.S. ethnic literatures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, c2013, s. 118. ISBN 978-1-137-29329-9.

improvisation emphasizing freedom through the relationship between African American music, dance, and the carnivalesque highlighted „the importance of unfettered artistic and bodily expression, and the uncontrollable experience of the reveler who is free to enjoy her heritage, her America, and by extension, herself.” (Francis, 2012, p. 119)

When the African people were enslaved and brought to America, they were denied the tools needed to the artistic expression of their emotions, therefore they found another outlet to show how they feel to the world, language.⁶⁶ „Language became their canvas and clay. Their voices became the forms through which they practiced their arts.” (Atkinson, 2000, p. 13) Morrison left spaces in all her novels for the readers to fill and invited them to look closely into the discourse of Black English oral tradition. She did so through songs and music which serve as filler and background in her texts, even sacred songs in *Beloved*.⁶⁷ „The litany of lyrics becomes like that sound right on the edge of consciousness that tantalizes the hearer/listener to listen harder, lean toward the place where the music comes from, and pay close attention.” (Atkinson, 2000, p. 26)

Oral tradition is also considered one of the crucial aspects of every culture in the world, in case of the African culture, it is mainly the Black English oral tradition. According to Atkinson, language reveals the concepts shaping the significance and legacy beyond the world itself. It also defines culture’s style and reflects the method of looking at life as well as the individual’s place within the culture.⁶⁸ This oral tradition of Black people was formed based on and influenced by the language spoken by African slaves in history. As Geneva Smitherman puts it, it is “an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America’s linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America. Black English is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture.” (Atkinson, 2000, p. 13)

Jeanne Delbaere-Garant believes that the aspect of the grotesque in magical-realist texts serves as a representation of the oral storytelling tradition. As Delbaere-Garant sees it, the meaning of grotesque aspects is either in distorting the reality of the story, for its greater

⁶⁶ ATKINSON, Yvonne, ed. Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison. In: CONNOR, Marc C. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, c2000, s. 13. ISBN 1-57806-284-5.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 25

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 12

effect or, on the contrary, in changing it so as to increase its believability.⁶⁹ Unlike Delbaere-Garant, other scholars have proposed a more widespread role for the grotesque in literature, locating grotesque and carnivalesque primarily in the African American community, rather than depicting a world in which magic and creative duality exist, arguing that magical elements are often misunderstood or feared by society if they exist outside the black community.⁷⁰

Another crucial part of the cultural heritage is the discourse of the specific culture, as for African people, they follow the discourse of the black community described in a number of essays, for instance in *Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison (2000)*. Morrison uses language to define those who are a part of the community and those who are not.⁷¹ Some characters choose to live outside the community themselves, they either want to be treated as white people or they will stay true to their traditions and their roots.

Macon Dead, a character from Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, demonstrates such usage of language and discourse for he separates himself from his community by his actions. An example includes him remaining seated while an elderly woman is standing, allowing the woman to make the first greeting, and allowing and not feeling ashamed of being referred to as "sir". He therefore casts himself in the role of a master, a controller, or The Man, which is not a favourable position in the African American community.⁷² Pilate, contrariwise, shows the contempt for white people by choosing to live as close to the outskirts as possible and believes in the truth of African American folk tradition.⁷³ „Reminiscent of the folk figure of the witch, who crosses the line between life and death, Pilate interacts with the dead and demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of herbal remedies by helping Ruth to conceive and protecting the unborn Milkman from the abortive efforts of his parents.” (Francis, 2012, p.

⁶⁹ FRANCIS, Angela J. Searching for Rhythm and Freedom: African American Magical Realism and the Creation of a Home Country. In: SANDÍN, Lyn Di Iorio a Richard PEREZ. *Moments of magical realism in U.S. ethnic literatures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, c2013, s. 111. ISBN 978-1-137-29329-9.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ ATKINSON, Yvonne, ed. *Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison*. In: CONNOR, Marc C. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, c2000, s. 19. ISBN 1-57806-284-5.

⁷² Ibid., p. 20

⁷³ FRANCIS, Angela J. Searching for Rhythm and Freedom: African American Magical Realism and the Creation of a Home Country. In: SANDÍN, Lyn Di Iorio a Richard PEREZ. *Moments of magical realism in U.S. ethnic literatures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, c2013, s. 115. ISBN 978-1-137-29329-9.

116) Pilate is the initiator of ritual and the keeper of the community because of her position, power, and other black people's faith in her actions.

Morrison tend to stress the importance of the black community for African American people and even in the early glimpses of those two characters in *Song of Solomon* the reader is shown „who has the knowledge of communal mores, who is a reliable storyteller, and—crucially—who has the power of the word, *nommo*, the African concept of the driving power that gives life and efficacy to all things.” (Jahn, 1961, p. 101)

THE ANALYSIS OF *THE BLUEST EYE*

The following chapter will contain the analysis of Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, in particular the background of writing the story, its synopsis, an analysis of themes and symbols with an emphasis on racial and gender aspects.

Background

Morrison was inspired by a classmate of hers when writing her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970. Unlike the author, this girl questioned the power of God and came to the sombre conclusion that God did not exist because she sincerely prayed for blue eyes for two long years and got none.⁷⁴ Toni believed in God and saw no reason for the girl's desire, because she appreciated her beauty even as an ordinary, yet black girl. The concept and definition of what beauty means to the separate characters will be provided later in this thesis, in the chapter on the concept of beauty in *The Bluest Eye*.

When Morrison was interviewed about her motivation for writing in 2004, and for writing *The Bluest Eye* specifically, she stated that she had been deeply concerned with the feelings of being ugly and had focused on the most vulnerable people in the world, which are children. Female children, female black children, the least important and often invisible to other people. Therefore, she wanted to put a little hurt black girl at the centre of the story and give full attention only to her and her feelings, which she eventually found extremely depressing, and had to surround this female character, Pecola, with others excited about being young yet

⁷⁴ ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: The Bluest Eye and A Mercy. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 215 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

understanding her situation. As this novel confirms, Morrison is here to speak of “all those peripheral little girls” who are robbed of their girlhoods and struggle for survival.⁷⁵

In all Morrison's novels we can find evidence that she remains faithful to the Black English oral tradition in her writing by using specific vocabulary. In *The Bluest Eye*, she uses unique terms such as ‘Big Mama’ meaning “one’s grandmother”, ‘big’ implying ‘older’ rather than ‘larger’. (Major, 1970, p. 325) This term is a Southern phrase which represents a continuation, a link, between generations, and also between the North and the South, past and present.⁷⁶ She employs taboo topics in her novels, for instance she points out Pecola’s first menses, which did not meet with the success she hoped for, because white American students thought about it as such an intimate thing they would not share with other white people. This shows a clash between white and traditional black culture, because in accordance with African black traditions, the onset menstruation is something that is valued by the whole community and marks the entry into womanhood, while in white, mainstream culture it is not something of high importance.⁷⁷

The novel is set in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison’s birth town, in the 1940s, the World War II period, which was an extremely difficult time for living, especially for people in Europe, because the United States aimed at keeping their status of an officially neutral country only supplying other countries, such as Britain, Soviet Union, or China. However, thousands of soldiers were killed or wounded when serving in the US Armed Forces and many people had to contend with poverty which is an aspect that Morrison also tried to project into her novel.

This novel is a grand narrative of history represented by the author’s designation of the three prostitutes as China, Poland, and Maginot Line, all referring to significant places during the war.⁷⁸ “The names China and Poland signify the European and Asian fronts, Maginot Line

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 212

⁷⁶ ATKINSON, Yvonne, ed. *Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison*. In: CONNOR, Marc C. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, c2000, s. 27. ISBN 1-57806-284-5.

⁷⁷ SURÁNYI, Ágnes, ed. *The Bluest Eye and Sula: black female experience from childhood to womanhood*. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, s. 16. ISBN 978-0-521-86111-3.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 12

refers to both literally and metaphorically to the tendency to focus on the wrong front," i.e., projecting one's guilt onto another.⁷⁹

As for the genre the novel falls into, it is quite problematic to clearly classify it in one category on which literary critics would agree. According to a number of critics, Kubitschek, Pin-chia Feng, Phyllis R. Klotman, and Geta LeSeur to name a few, the tales of "growing-up" are more often than not viewed as 'bildungsromans', nevertheless, Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert struggles with this classification of *The Bluest Eye* for she feels the narratives of education and development in the novel are more unconventional and subversive; moreover, none of the characters arrive at the conclusion typical of a bildungsroman: self-actualization and fulfilment.⁸⁰ Claudine Raynaud goes even further by describing this novel as an 'anti-Bildungsroman' because it is about "the gradual descent into schizophrenia of the young black protagonist."⁸¹ Morrison simultaneously uses and rejects, revises and problematizes a genre the coordinates of which do not accommodate the growing up of many young black girls.⁸²

Synopsis

The Bluest Eye is a coming-of-age narrative which tells the parallel, yet very different stories, of the its main protagonists, Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer, both „African-American young girls faced with a world that disregards their existence and undermines their sense of self-worth during the adolescent years that are central to healthy identity formation.“ (Gillespie, 2008, p. 46) Their approach to coping with being invisible and unloved by others varies greatly depending on several factors that will be further elaborated in this work.

The story is narrated mostly from Claudia's point of view, who is about nine years old in the time this story takes places. She, as an adult, is looking back on her childhood and tries to understand things better and reconcile her successful survival of childhood with the tragedy

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 214 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

⁸¹ SURÁNYI, Ágnes, ed. *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*: black female experience from childhood to womanhood. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, s. 14. ISBN 978-0-521-86111-3.

⁸² ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 214 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

of Pecola's life.⁸³ According to Carmen Gillespie, the novel signifies the „adult Claudia's desire to come to terms with her helplessness and, perhaps, to do the only thing she possibly can for Pecola: tell her story.” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 47) In the following chapters, the synopsis of each season will be provided.

The novel is divided into four parts based on the seasons of the year starting with autumn and ending with summer. The implication of the cyclical seasonal structure is that the events in the story are likely to be repeated. (Surányi, 2007, p. 13) Nevertheless the features of each season in the book are far from the general understanding. As Mark Ledbetter comments, autumn is characterized by a season of child's sickness, and the colours of autumn are used to describe Claudia's vomit, instead of the expected notion of the season with leaves of beautiful colours.⁸⁴ Winter should be a playful season and the child's primary emotion should be anticipation, of which there is none, moreover, „spring echoes autumn and winter with references to death.” (Ledbetter, 1996, p. 27)

Autumn

In this part of the novel two families are introduced, the Breedlove family and the MacTeer family. Claudia MacTeer describes in retrospect, how she learned from the sounds of her mother and older women's conversations valuable information about becoming an adult woman in the black community.⁸⁵ The MacTeer family takes a boarder into their home, Mr. Henry who is able to listen and pay attention to Claudia and Frieda and therefore, they both adore him. Later on, an accident of the Breedloves is described, the family's father burned their home down, and so their daughter, Pecola Breedlove, temporarily stays with the MacTeers. It is also the time of Pecola's passage from girlhood to womanhood for she got her first period and wondered what this development would change for her.

⁸³ GILLESPIE, Carmen. The Bluest Eye. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 47. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

⁸⁴ SURÁNYI, Ágnes, ed. The Bluest Eye and Sula: black female experience from childhood to womanhood. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, s. 13. ISBN 978-0-521-86111-3.

⁸⁵ GILLESPIE, Carmen. The Bluest Eye. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 47. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

Winter

In winter Pecola and Claudia and Frieda, the MacTeer sisters, meet a new girl coming from the big city of Toledo, Ohio, Maureen Peal, an upper-middle class, light-skinned, green-eyed, well-dressed child quickly adored by the people at school and in the whole community.⁸⁶ It is the moment when Claudia tries to understand that, perhaps, it is the physical appearance that determines what treatment one receives in the world. However, after a large argument, this friendship is ended by Maureen calling all three girls ugly, which she believes is a trait defined by the colour of one's skin and the amount of money one has. The last chapter of the 'Winter' section talks about an incident that happened between Pecola and Junior, the son of Geraldine, a wealthy lady who cared first about her own beauty, her cat, and only then about her son.

Spring

The third section of the novel represents a contrast between the traditional expectations of the spring season with the realities of human existence.⁸⁷ Instead of hopefulness, Frieda and her family experience hopelessness and disappointment when they had to kick Mr. Henry out of their home after his molestation of Frieda. The origins and roots of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove are revealed and the events in their lives that have made them the people they are at the time of the novel. Towards the end of this section, Cholly rapes his own daughter, Pecola, and the entire act is surprisingly seen and described from the point of view of Cholly, the rapist. Pauline, Pecola's mother, beats Pecola and does not believe her when she tries to tell her about being raped by Cholly. The final chapter introduces Soaphead Church, also known as Elihue Micah Whitcomb, a spiritualist, and a paedophile, that Pecola sought out in her desperate desire to have blue eyes.

Summer

The 'Summer' section covers Claudia's reflection of Pecola's story where the truth of the story is less disturbing to her than the response of the town to it because the people only gossiped about what happened but never tried to intervene and help the poor little girl.⁸⁸ The second

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 49

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 50

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 51

essential part of the section is a dialogue between Pecola and someone or something that a number of authors name an 'alter ego'. The dialogue is an example of a split personality caused by a traumatic experience of rape and pregnancy at such a young age. The novel ends with Claudia's conclusion about what really happened to Pecola and who is to blame for her tragic fate.

Themes and symbols in *The Bluest Eye*

This chapter will cover the key themes, motifs, and symbols in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. The main focus will be on race and racism, the concept of beauty, and the importance of family in the construction of personal identity. Blue eyes representing an essential symbol of this work will also be studied.

Race and racism

Unfortunately, race is still for some people an aspect from which they derive a person's behaviour and character and treat them based on prejudice. People of African descent were neglected, overlooked, and even abused in the United States for years, and this invisibility and insignificance of black people can also be felt and seen in *The Bluest Eye*.

Morrison writes about a little black girl in whose fate nobody takes interest, and by the distasteful situations which repeatedly occur in her works she expresses her „protest against a deeply flawed social/gender system that deems several secondary, and rings a caveat against a highly partial viewing policy that makes many invisible.“ (Roye, 2012, p. 225)

The Bluest Eye portrays the motif of the black community in a certain dichotomy, on one hand, the black community has means to sustain and celebrate itself, on the other, its conscious or unconscious willingness to support and eternalize the racist idea of white being beautiful and superior over blackness destroys the novel's main protagonist, Pecola Breedlove.⁸⁹ Pecola is not only a victim of white society but also of her black father, who impregnates her and causes her further trauma.

⁸⁹ WILLIAMS, Dana A. Contemporary African American women writers. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 72. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

Pecola loves Mary Jane candy, when she goes to buy it one day to a store owned by a white immigrant Mr. Yacobowski, he refuses to even look at her or touch her palm to take coins from her which again confirms the insignificance and invisibility of a little black girl for the white gaze.⁹⁰ Her father repeatedly rapes her, her mother has little affection for her, she is teased by other black boys at school for being what themselves represent, i.e., blackness and backwardness, and when she has gone mad, the entire community rejects her.⁹¹

Pauline, nicknamed as Polly, is Pecola's mother who displays the racial bias by caring more about the white children she babysits than her own, black children. In the house of the Fisher family, where Pauline works, an accident happened when Pecola touched a hot pan, it fell on the floor and stained it with blueberry juice. This excerpt shows how Pauline differs in her expression in relation to who she is talking to, the white girl or her black daughter.:

Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. "Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you... work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor." Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread. The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it." (Morrison, 2007, p. 108-109)

Ever since Pauline was a child, nobody noticed her, nor was she made to feel special growing up as one of nine children. Left to her own imagination, she created a fantasy about romantic love and an ideal man to lead her out of her obscurity.⁹² „While pregnant with her first child, Sammy, she loses a tooth as she eats candy during a Gable and Harlow film. This loss signifies

⁹⁰ SURÁNYI, Ágnes, ed. *The Bluest Eye and Sula: black female experience from childhood to womanhood*. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, s. 12. ISBN 978-0-521-86111-3.

⁹¹ ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: The Bluest Eye and A Mercy. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 215 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

⁹² GILLESPIE, Carmen. *The Bluest Eye*. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 68. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

her self-perception as ugly with an imperfect mouth, so unlike those on the screen.” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 68) She then uses violence, including on her own children, to vent her frustration. The white ideals of beauty seen on the screen, billboards, or candy and its impact on the characters will be discussed later in the chapter focused on the concept of beauty.

However, Morrison also included characters who despite being pushed to the very fringes of society⁹³, fight back the oppression of the white supremacy in her novel. This fight and ‘oppositional space’ are embodied by three whores whose names refer to key places of World War II as mentioned earlier – China, Poland, and Miss Marie. They refuse to internalize social dictums and this resistive attitude symbolize hope that a certain amount of opposition to oppression is possible.⁹⁴

They are referred to as: „Three merry gargoyles. Three merry harridans”. (Morrison, 2007, p. 55) As Atkinson points out, these gargoyles literally and figuratively live above the Breedloves, just as architectural gargoyles are usually found on the top of structures.⁹⁵ To use those two terms for the three women is appropriate for they scold and can be vicious, but at the same time are a form of protection for their community.⁹⁶ Unlike the Gothic perception of gargoyles, these three are associated with beauty: „Poland singing—her voice sweet and hard, like new strawberries.” According to the Black English oral tradition they are the controllers and extollers of the power of the spoken word.⁹⁷

The three prostitutes cannot serve as an example to the little black girls, like Pecola, nevertheless, they can encourage them not to internalize what other people see in them or think about their appearance or personality. They, in fact, supply the only nurturing model of motherhood for Pecola for the composite character descriptions of the women represent the motherly qualities she lacks in her own home. Marie cooks and addresses Pecola with sweet epithets and references to food, China shows her the basics about hygiene and grooming, and

⁹³ ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: The Bluest Eye and A Mercy. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 223 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 224

⁹⁵ ATKINSON, Yvonne, ed. Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison. In: CONNOR, Marc C. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, c2000, s. 15. ISBN 1-57806-284-5.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 16

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Poland pleasant singing all the time makes her feel even better, almost at home.⁹⁸ Moreover, they tell Pecola stories of their lives and let her know what being loved means.

Morrison's whores are interrupted girls who have grown into resilient women; they are "whores in the whore's clothing", without any pretense to meekness or furnishing sentimental excuses for their moral fall. (Roye, 2012, p. 224) They know their own worth and therefore refuse to feel as inferior, even if other people perceive them as such.

In this excerpt from the novel, Morrison shows their attitude to men regardless on their racial affiliation:

Except for Marie's fabled love for Dewey Prince, these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use. Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever—all were inadequate and weak, all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath. They took delight in cheating them. On one occasion the town well knew, they lured a Jew up the stairs, pounced on him, all three, held him up by the heels, shook everything out of his pants pockets, and threw him out of the window. (Morrison, 2007, p. 56)

However, they hated women as well as men, and called them 'sugar-coat whores'. The only women they had respect for were the "good Christian colored women" whose reputation was spotless, and who tended to her family, who didn't drink, smoke, or run around. (Morrison, 2007, p. 56)

Racial affiliation very often determines the amount of money a family can earn and what they can afford. Apart from racism, the MacTeers also suffer from poverty, as evidenced in the situation from the novel where Claudia and Frieda are ashamed of having no money to pay for an ice cream. In contrast with Maureen Peal who shows off her wealth and generosity by buying Pecola an ice cream, the sisters conceal their embarrassment by declaring they did not really want any.⁹⁹ The money also symbolizes the great sacrifice that Claudia and Frieda decide

⁹⁸ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. I's Got the Blues: Malochia, Magic, and the Descent into Madness in *The Bluest Eye*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 45. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

⁹⁹ ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 217 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

to make in order to fulfil their wish for Pecola to have a healthy baby. They dig and hide their hard-earned money along with marigold seeds hoping that their wish will come true.¹⁰⁰

Internalized racism and self-loathing

Pecola serves as an illustration of an internalized racism for she internalizes the world's judgements about her whereas Claudia and Frieda strive to analyse those.¹⁰¹ Richard Andersen defines the phenomenon of "internalized" racism as a longing for white standards of beauty, which finally make the people look down upon themselves and make them also lose their self-confidence. (Andersen, 2006)

Pecola views herself only using others' eyes, never her own, as Morrison describes in the novel: „...she would never know her beauty. She would only see what there was to see: the eyes of other people.”. (Morrison, 2007, p. 47) According to those strategies of dealing with racism introduced by Morrison, Pecola would fall into the category of self-loathing for she takes to heart all the hate and disrespect she has experienced in her life. The key difference between Pecola and the MacTeer girls in relation to racism is that Claudia and Frieda realize that they can only slightly resist but never completely reject the dominant, white, culture around them, but they accept it without internalizing.¹⁰²

Another example of self-loathing as a way of dealing with life in a racist society can be seen in the attack on Pecola by a group of boys at school. In this excerpt the author suggests that their own disdain for blackness caused their cruel behaviour:

„Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo ...” They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. (Morrison, 2007, p. 65)

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 217

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 220

¹⁰² ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: The Bluest Eye and A Mercy. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 220 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

Her traumatic experience of being raped for the first time, then a couple of times again, and the feeling of indifference and inferiority contributed to the fragmentation of her mind and soul. It is only the imagined self at the end of the novel, that allows Pecola to find voice as well as vision.

Pecola is not the only character who believes that what other people see in you, is reality, and therefore internalizes the racist thoughts. She only seems to find happiness after losing her mind, her sanity. Pecola resembles her mother Pauline in that aspect for she „finds happiness in losing her Self in Polly.“ (Roye, 2012, p. 222) She loves to feel as a part of the white world, that she „resists and refuses to attend to the small demands that her own ‘black’ family has on her love and care.“ (Roye, 2012, p. 221-222)

The process of internalization can be recognized in case of the whole Breedlove family too. They believe in the reality they see through their eyes and evaluate themselves in relation to how other people treat them and how they react to them. Their ugliness encircled them even if they did not generate it because they internalize and accept the reality they are exposed to.¹⁰³:

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. “Yes,” they had said. “You are right.” And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (Morrison, 2007, p. 39)

As Zauditu-Selassie puts it, Morrison illustrates the ways in which the power of images outside the cosmological frame of blackness disrupts and destroys the worldview of people, and the people as well. (Zauditu-Selassie, 2009, p. 32)

The Concept of Beauty

In the 1960s, when Morrison was writing *The Bluest Eye*, the sense of black being beautiful occurred, nevertheless, the author did not understand why the whites have to say out loud

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 44

that blacks are beautiful. As she said in an interview from 2004, she felt no need to emphasize the fact for it was always true, and it made her wonder, whether it is beauty what makes us human and acceptable.

On the home front, Hollywood provided distraction from the socio-economic collapse and the calamity of war in Europe during the 1930s through a creation of illusions of wealth and happiness while insidiously reinforcing white notions of beauty. Shirley Temple, Jean Harlow, or Mary Jane were often-mentioned characters in the text serving to emphasize the omnipresence of the white gaze. Those white-skinned, blond-haired, blue-eyed girls became popular to the extent of being used as trademarks on cups and candies.¹⁰⁴ The reader can then follow its impact on the identity formation process of the weakest characters in the book.¹⁰⁵ The most notable difference in perception of one's own beauty and self-worth is portrayed through the characters of Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer.

According to Gurleen Grewal, Claudia „unlearns her way into an enabling selfhood”, while Pecola learns to evade and consequently erase her selfhood.¹⁰⁶ Unlike Pecola, who is unhappy, overlooked, emotionally neglected, and frustrated, her peer Claudia accepts her deficiency in the racial binary constructed by society and is able to define and value herself as she is, a young black girl.¹⁰⁷

As Susmita Roye states in her thesis, when comparing Pecola's coping strategy to those of the MacTeer sisters' strategy; „the same blackness of skin that keeps Pecola cowed makes Claudia and Frieda more self-assertive; the unlovable ugliness that breaks Pecola incites Claudia to destroy beautiful white dolls.” (Roye, 2012, p. 220)

Claudia is happy and proud to be African American and values black culture. She receives white dolls for Christmas, even though her parents can ill afford them, which can be seen as her

¹⁰⁴ ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: The Bluest Eye and A Mercy. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 215 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

¹⁰⁵ SURÁNYI, Ágnes, ed. *The Bluest Eye and Sula: black female experience from childhood to womanhood*. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, s. 12. ISBN 978-0-521-86111-3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221

¹⁰⁷ WILLIAMS, Dana A. Contemporary African American women writers. In: MITCHELL, Angelyn a Danille K. TAYLOR. *The Cambridge companion to African American women's literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, s. 72. ISBN 978-0-521-67582-6.

mother's unfulfilled desire for such a present as a little girl.¹⁰⁸ When Claudia is given the white baby doll, she harshly rejects it. She notes the conspiratorial nature of the world which attempts to cast its gaze and for African people to agree to their own devaluation.¹⁰⁹ She refuses the inferior status of black people and expresses her protest against white supremacy by dismembering the doll, she wants to destroy not only the doll, but also what the doll represents.¹¹⁰ This scene is depicted in the following excerpt from the novel:

Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. (Morrison, 2007, p. 74)

According to Zauditu-Selassie, it is Claudia's valuation of blackness that saves her from the cultural impositions. She even chides her parents for attempting to rob her of her "tribal" identity for she wants to stay African, stay true to the black cultural traditions.¹¹¹ Claudia even resists when she has to wash her ink marks, because in African culture such marks are recodified warrior marks.

In the 'Autumn' section Claudia notes, "I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone." The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward." (Morrison, 2007, p. 22) Sitting on low stools symbolizes black traditional belief in the reliability of stools being a way to connect with elder or former members of the community.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: The Bluest Eye and A Mercy. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 217 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

¹⁰⁹ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. I's Got the Blues: Malochia, Magic, and the Descent into Madness in The Bluest Eye. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 45. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 46

¹¹² Ibid.

Throughout African American literature the effort to negate the African self or personality has been well documented. „The judging eyes, defining gazes, malevolent eyes, turned inward on Africans made them see themselves in the same manner as their captors and armed them with the same soul-extinguishing aspirations.” (Zauditu-Selassie, 2009, p. 29-30)

Otten notes that Morrison’s characters, including Claudia, have to “somehow violate the rule of the oppressive system, reject the values it venerates, and recover the human potential denied to blacks”. (Otten, 1989, p. 3) Claudia manages to violate the system by staying true to herself, her descent, ancestors, and culture and by appreciating and valuing blackness in general. The difference in self-view of Pecola and Claudia stems from the difference in the family background of the two girls which will be described later in this thesis.

The symbolism of the blue eyes

Pecola is constantly mistreated by people surrounding her, except the MacTeer family and the three prostitutes who treat her with the kindness she deserves because she is still a decent child, even though she is African American. She compares herself to the white, or at least lighter-skinned children she meets at school and feels frustrated and sad because of not being treated and adored just like them by anyone. She wonders, if she had those blue eyes, maybe they would like her better and so she is praying to God for the bluest eyes every day, without a break. Those bluest eyes can be seen as the symbol of a deliverance from her harsh reality, or as a means of freeing her from the darkness in which she lives.

Having blue eyes is the metaphoric representation of having love, acceptance, and family, thus everything Pecola lacks in her life.¹¹³ For Pecola, her “blue eyes” replace the centre or nucleus of community. It is her eyes that nurture her and affirm her.¹¹⁴ In the novel, Frieda employs another type of eye when she defends Pecola from the boys who insult her. Frieda mirrors the look she had seen her mother use to keep Cain at bay. It is not explicitly said whether it was Frieda's eyes or Maureen's that caused them to stop insulting and taunting Pecola. Nevertheless, the author implies that it were Maureen’s eyes and her gaze: „They buckled in

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 43

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 29

confusion, not willing to beat up three girls under her [Maureen's] watchful gaze." (Morrison, 2007, p. 67)

One of the most damaging encounters Pecola has occurs with Mr. Yacobowski whose eyes are rather unresponsive. The narrator asserts, „At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary." (Morrison, 2007, p. 48) The mirror of Mr. Yacobowski's eyes and those of other white people become the inverted reflection through which Pecola sees herself and the world.¹¹⁵

Family as a safe harbour

Family should serve as a safe haven, a sacred place where everyone feels loved and accepted regardless of their weaknesses and shortcomings. In this safe and accepting environment people can fully develop their potential and learn the basics of the how to function in society so that they can become its recognized members, capable of building genuine relationships. There are two families in the centre of the novel, both consisting of people of unique personalities and therefore functioning and behaving in a different way.

The Breedlove family consists of four members—a father Cholly, a mother Pauline, a son Sammy, and a daughter Pecola—whose minds and souls are all tainted, disintegrated by what they have been through or are still going through. The family define themselves as ugly because of the message they receive from the community, white as well as black. The frequency of interactions is very low, the only form of exchange consists almost entirely of verbal, physical, and ultimately sexual abuse.¹¹⁶ All of the characters react to the crumbling family situation in their own, personal way. Sammy tries to escape and keeps running away, Pecola, on the other hand, opposes an exact opposite strategy and transforms her feelings

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 45

¹¹⁶ GILLESPIE, Carmen. The Bluest Eye. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 48. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

into self-hatred. Sammy is no companion to her for he never includes her into his plans of escaping the abusive household.

As for the parents, Cholly was left by his mother just four days after he was born, raised by his Aunt Jimmy who died when Cholly was only 13. However, the traumatic experience from growing up without his own biological parents even worsens when he embarks on his first sexual encounter in the woods with Darlene, a young lady. While discovering how sexuality works, they are interrupted by a group of white hunters forcing them to copulate under their violating gaze.¹¹⁷ Cholly is incapable of defending himself or Darlene and so he turns his anger against her. „This channeling of frustration to those weaker than him is a pattern he will repeat throughout his life with devastating consequences for those close to him.” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 51)

Pauline’s past has already been described in chapter 4.3.1 on race and racism as one of the central themes of *The Bluest Eye*. According to Susan Willis, Pauline Breedlove lives a form of schizophrenia because she dreams about a life beyond her reach, the life she sees in movies and partially leads in her employer’s house.¹¹⁸ Richard Andersen goes even further and draws attention to the “psychic split between Pauline and Polly”. (Andersen, 2006, p. 33) Andersen explains, that the same woman who has little affection to her own daughter to whom she remains “Mrs. Breedlove”, is also the approachable, caring mother-like figure to the little white Fisher girl, who is allowed to call her “Polly”.¹¹⁹

Both of Pecola’s parents are frustrated and have to deal with this feeling, Cholly becomes violent towards people around him and drinks a lot, and Pauline gives up on creating her own identity realizing that she could never look like the white women she sees on the screen or billboards and decides to take care of whites instead of her life and her own children.

The name ‘Breedlove’ heightens the tragic irony of Pecola’s loveless existence because they breed little or no love.¹²⁰ The reader should stop and think about how devastated and desperate this little girl must have been that she decided to go to ‘Soaphead Church’, the child

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 51

¹¹⁸ ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: The Bluest Eye and A Mercy. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 221 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 213

molester and a spiritual healer, for help rather than to her own parents. There is a hint in the narrative that the man felt sorry for Pecola and wanted to help her, however he tricks her to get rid of a dog he despises.

Pecola has to overcome a far greater trauma than the rape for she is not only being raped physically, but also psychically because Polly constantly ravishes her child's self-worth.¹²¹ In comparison to Polly who only cared about the white children, Cholly loved his daughter, but he was not able to show his love naturally as one would expect for his personality has been shattered to pieces when he wanted to find and experience love. Firstly, abandoned by his birth mother, secondly, frustrated by his first sexual encounter, and finally, rejected by his own father. The following excerpt reflects Claudia's attempt to understand Cholly's behaviour.:

Oh, some of us "loved" her. The Maginot Line. And Cholly loved her. I'm 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 his 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 safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye. (Morrison, 2007, p. 206)

Cholly's rape of Pecola is quite unexpectedly described from his point of view. Morrison shows her as a victim unable or unwilling to speak about her rape to emphasize the consequences of a traumatic experience.¹²² Pecola as a child is unable to tell the story, the language needed for that is simply not available to her, that is the reason why Morrison decided to use a narrator other than herself.¹²³ As Awkward explains, Pecola who is denied a sense of voice to articulate her pain ultimately finds not one, but two voices—her own voice, the voice of her alter ego.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 219

¹²² SURÁNYI, Ágnes, ed. *The Bluest Eye and Sula: black female experience from childhood to womanhood*. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, s. 15. ISBN 978-0-521-86111-3.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 17

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 15

Even though Morrison would often put a female character in the centre of her novels and focus on her beauty, feelings, and emotions which are usually neglected and overlooked, she has a remarkable empathy for men as well as women, even for the antagonist of the story, Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, whose innocence is evident in the situation of his first sexual encounter.

The frustration of the Breedlove family is contrasted with the love of the MacTeer family. Claudia and Frieda MacTeers are brought up in a very different way, their parents love them unconditionally and take good care of them even though they suffer from poverty. Unlike Pecola, they are not confirmed in the belief of her own ugliness and inferiority which supports them in the process of forming their identity. Claudia and Frieda receive love and attention, though in crude manner incomprehensible to them at younger age. Nevertheless, the adult Claudia comes to understand that the hand which whipped them for small faults was also the hand that did not let them die of cold.¹²⁵ The symbolism of the hand is depicted in the following excerpt.:

„...it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die.“ (Morrison, 2007, p. 12)

All the three girls are vulnerable, Pecola as well as Claudia and Frieda, however the MacTeer sisters are strongly protected by their parents who are always ready to stand up for them. Pecola's psychological fragmentation roots in the absence and inability to form relationships, an aspect that allows Claudia to overcome the difficulties of growing up as a little black girl.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ GILLESPIE, Carmen. *The Bluest Eye*. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 53. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

Cultural discourse and the black community

In traditional life of African people, the individual does not and cannot exist alone. People construct their existence through relationships and connections with other people, including those of past generations.¹²⁷ As John S. Mbiti explains, physical birth is not enough, the child must go through rites of incorporation to become fully integrated into the entire society. (John, S. Mbiti, 1969, p. 108) Moreover, the family also has to teach their children about the community's discourse otherwise a gap is formed that needs to be filled one day. This may be one of the reasons why Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* as a cautionary tale, a story which should not be repeated, so she stressed the importance of family, community, and discourse.¹²⁸

After Pecola's rape and pregnancy, Claudia notices that the adults in the community only talk about the violation of the child, but do not express sympathy for Pecola and her unborn child.¹²⁹ The lack of compassion leads them to act the only possible way they knew, relying on their childhood beliefs. They plant seeds of marigolds in order to ensure, or at least support, the survival of Pecola's baby. By the ritual they performed, the MacTeer sisters show devotion to their roots and ancestors. Even though they are not in puberty, they clearly understand the necessity of sacrifice in order to change outcomes.¹³⁰ The MacTeer girls demonstrate their awareness of nature and their spiritual suitability to be the next generation of women who "dreamed dreams that no one knew—not even themselves, in any coherent fashion—and saw visions no one could understand." (Walker, 1983, p. 232)

Ultimately, the seeds do not grow, which may symbolize futility of Claudia's attempt to defy the realities of maturity that the adults in her life have already accepted—she cannot save

¹²⁷ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. I's Got the Blues: Malochia, Magic, and the Descent into Madness in *The Bluest Eye*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 29. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

¹²⁸ ATKINSON, Yvonne, ed. Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison. In: CONNOR, Marc C. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, c2000, s. 18. ISBN 1-57806-284-5.

¹²⁹ GILLESPIE, Carmen. The Bluest Eye. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 61. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

¹³⁰ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. I's Got the Blues: Malochia, Magic, and the Descent into Madness in *The Bluest Eye*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 47. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

Pecola and change the reality in which they both exist. The symbolism of marigolds and Claudia's disillusionment are portrayed in the excerpt from the novel:

„And now when I see her searching the garbage—for what? The thing we assassinated? I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late.” (Morrison, 2007, p. 206)

The marigold seeds, and seeds in general, are „archetypal symbols, sacred images, models of behavior, as well as modes of thought; all make up the traditional universe mythic symbols and ritual acts expressing the genetic and historical lineage of a community.” (Zauditu-Selassie, 2009, p. 48) The stillborn child, that Pecola delivers, represents the spiritual and social taboo associated with the violation of community rules created by Cholly Breedlove's incestuous acts.¹³¹ When Claudia and Frieda's ritual does not work, Claudia accepts the fact that it must have been the hostility of the land that caused the seeds to be unproductive.

Claudia eventually realizes the collective guilt, that it was a failure of the entire community that contributed to her insanity. There is a shift from “I” to “we” and an oscillation between “our” and “my” in the final part of Claudia's narrative which generates ambiguity. (Surányi, 2007, p. 16):

„All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous.” (Morrison, 2007, p. 205)

Giving nicknames is another important motif in the novel connected with the traditions of the black community. „Nicknames have tremendous value in black communities in making an

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 48

individual feel a sense of belonging to his/her larger group.” (Roye, 2012, p. 221) As Trudier Harris emphasizes that by the act of giving Pauline a nickname, “Polly”, the white Fisher family claims her love and loyalty. He says that spending time with the white family makes Pauline feel special and that it gives her the sense of belonging she lacked as a child in her own, black, family.¹³²

Morrison wanted to portray the black community as a cohesive unit, but at the same time, she was not afraid to show its cracks and occasional disparity. She undermined the myth of black cohesiveness in *The Bluest Eye* with whiteness offstage, she showed black people fighting with each other—murdering, raping, breaking up marriages, burning down houses.¹³³

THE ANALYSIS OF *BELOVED*

The following chapter will provide the analysis of Morrison’s fifth novel and also Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, first published in 1987. The analysis will focus primarily on the story’s synopsis, the themes, and symbols with an emphasis on racial and gender aspects, and partly on Morrison’s inspiration for writing the story.

Background

The genesis for *Beloved* is depicted in chapter 3.3.4 including the real-life story of Margaret Garner from the 1850s Morrison was inspired by. However, as she stated in the interview for *The New Yorker Magazine*, she was further motivated by the silence and absences in literature to write something real. She did not want to be popular with people for writing what they want to hear, based on her intuition, she felt that she had to write something real and true that is an essential, yet cruel part of the black culture.¹³⁴ Through the re-significations of Middle Passage memory and the characters’ survival of subsequent of inhumane acts in the novel, Morrison attempts to assist the readers in reconstructing their own expunged painful

¹³² ROYE, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: The Bluest Eye and A Mercy. *JSTOR* [online]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, Winter, 2012, **35**(1), 221 [cit. 2023-03-15]. Dostupné z: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>.

¹³³ ALS, Hilton. Toni Morrison and the Ghosts in the House: From 2003: As an editor, author, and professor, Morrison has fostered a generation of black writers. *The New Yorker* [online]. New York: Condé Nast Publications, c2023, Oct 19, 2003 [cit. 2023-03-22]. Dostupné z: <https://scalar.lehigh.edu/toni-morrison/external?link=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.newyorker.com%2Fmagazine%2F2003%2F10%2F27%2Fghosts-in-the-house&prev=https%3A%2F%2Fscalar.lehigh.edu%2Ftoni-morrison%2Ftoni-morrison-biographical-note>

¹³⁴ Ibid.

memories of being held captive as slaves and shows them how to deal with it and finally be healed.¹³⁵

When writing *Beloved*, Morrison privileged “the history as life lived” over “the history as imagined”, because the novel gives voices to those left voiceless by the history books and those whose views were erased.¹³⁶ „Morrison refused to present an ideal or speak in unison, even if it meant she was perceived as a traitor.” (Als, 2003) For this matter she became a frequent target of literary critics but that did not bother or stop her from writing more novels.¹³⁷

After the film *Beloved* was released in 1998, starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover, the reviews of the film contained mixed, often conflicting opinions. The people who read the book first liked the story better than those who did not read it for the novel's timeline is unstable, constantly shifting between past and present which made it quite challenging for the film makers and cinematographers to capture. Nonetheless, Morrison's success was inescapable, and even more people took notice when the author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

Synopsis

Beloved follows a story of two main characters Sethe and Paul D, former slaves, both trying to come to terms with and move past their traumatic past experience and understand what it means to truly 'be'. The novel falls into the literary genre of slave narrative for it elaborates on the theme of the trauma caused by slavery and the racial injustice, features characteristic for this genre. Nevertheless, Morrison offers readers a new way to read the slave narrative by shifting from the slave master and his deeds to the interior life of enslaved people.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in *Beloved*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 167. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

¹³⁶ MORRISON, Toni. Behind the Making of The Black Book. In: MORRISON, Toni. *Black World*. 1974, s. 88.

¹³⁷ ALS, Hilton. Toni Morrison and the Ghosts in the House: From 2003: As an editor, author, and professor, Morrison has fostered a generation of black writers. *The New Yorker* [online]. New York: Condé Nast Publications, c2023, Oct 19, 2003 [cit. 2023-03-22]. Dostupné z: <https://scalar.lehigh.edu/toni-morrison/external?link=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.newyorker.com%2Fmagazine%2F2003%2F10%2F27%2Fghosts-in-the-house&prev=https%3A%2F%2Fscalar.lehigh.edu%2Ftoni-morrison%2Ftoni-morrison-biographical-note>

¹³⁸ MCKENZIE, Marilyn Mobley. Spaces for readers: the novels of Toni Morrison. In: GRAHAM, Maryemma, ed. *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, s. 229. ISBN 978-0-511-22179-8.

However, the novel is definitely a prime example of a bildungsroman, as the protagonists are forced to deal with their past in order to increase their self-esteem, build their identity and move forward in their lives.

The narrative consists of three sections and the story constantly moves back from the present moment to the past of the characters' lives. The synopsis will therefore be provided regardless of the order of events in individual sections.

The story starts in 1873, in a house outside of Cincinnati, 124 Bluestone Road occupied by Sethe and her daughter Denver. The whole community believes that the house is haunted by a ghost or a malevolent spirit which is eventually revealed to be a ghost of Sethe's dead child, a daughter she had no chance to name. Her sons have been driven away from the uncertainty and fear of the house. Their grandmother, Baby Suggs, died shortly after they left their home.

One day, Paul D, a former slave and friend of Sethe's who worked as a slave on the same farm as her, ironically called 'Sweet Home' and owned by Mr. Garner, arrives at their house along with four other people including her husband Halle. Paul D makes Sethe feel safe and soon after they develop feelings for one another which unsettled Denver. Denver and Paul D's relationship suffered mainly due to a dispute regarding the spirit of Beloved, which Paul D tried to banish from the house, and which, on the other hand, Denver saw as her comrade.¹³⁹

After a carnival Paul D takes Sethe and Denver to, they encounter a strange woman in front of their house who claims her name is Beloved without any last name. Sethe feels a special bond with this woman and decides to take her into their home. Denver becomes so close to her that she lies to Sethe about what she has seen which even deepens the divide between her and Paul D who is rather suspicious about Beloved. Paul D eventually moves out after he is seduced by Beloved who forces him to make love to her. Beloved gradually becomes jealous of anyone who wants to get any attention from Sethe and craves her full sympathy and love.

The story shifts back to Sethe's past experience on Sweet Home when Mr. Garner died and a schoolteacher became its new owner, and thus the slaves' new owner. Sethe was violated by the nephews, the men helping the schoolteacher, who tied her up, beat her and took her breast milk. Halle, Sethe's husband, witnessed the attack and not being able to act to prevent

¹³⁹ GILLESPIE, Carmen. Beloved. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 20. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

it or to effectively intervene sent him into insanity.¹⁴⁰ The treatment was so horrible and unbearable that she decided to run away, however the schoolteacher finds her and attempts to take them back. This part of the novel is reminiscent of Margaret Garner's story as Sethe decides that her children will not live in slavery and instead tries to kill them, only succeeding in killing her eldest daughter. Only after Paul D finds out the truth about Sethe's miserable story towards the end of the novel, he returns to express his understanding, love, and support.

Beloved, as a ghost of her dead daughter, missing the love and attention demands even more of it, more than Sethe can psychically and mentally give her. However, Sethe, consumed by her guilt, fulfils all of Beloved's demands to make up for what she took from her by ending her daughter's life so early. Beloved takes advantage of her mother's sense of failure and guilt, and the situation gets to the point where Sethe can't work anymore, and it is her steps out to provide the things they all really need to exist—food, clothing, and the like.¹⁴¹ Terrified of what might happen, Denver visits her teacher Lady Jones with hope she might help her solve the situation. Eventually the whole community is willing to help them, the women attempt to exorcise Beloved's spirit out of the house. When they arrive at 124, Bluestone Road, they see Sethe and pregnant Beloved standing on the porch. The black women finally manage to make Beloved disappear for good and Sethe and Paul D start to explore their relationship.

The themes and symbols in *Beloved*

Morrison explores the themes of memory, family bond, love, and guides the reader through all aspects of the process of building one's own identity and realizing one's worth after years of dehumanization and denial of one's emotions in slavery.

Slavery and gendered differences

Morrison always leaves spaces for readers to fill in her novels, and in case of *Beloved* she goes even further by metaphorically kidnapping the reader in the same way as the slaves were abducted from Africa, she takes them to a completely foreign environment without any preparation or introduction. This act can serve as a first glimpse of the shared experience

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27

between the reader and the novel's characters.¹⁴² „Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense.” (Morrison, 2000, p. 54)

Morrison read documents in order to ground her narrative in historical “reality”. All the elements, such as the bit worn by Paul D, the whip, or the chain gang, used in the story derive from identifiable historical sources.¹⁴³ The bit can also be carried over into metaphoric exploration of the “face” as when the slaves wore it too often, it caused them to wear a permanent smile, as in the case of Sethe's mother: „when she wasn't smiling, she smiled, and I never saw her own smile.”. (Morrison, 2016, p. 240)

Slavery brought about a partial change in the roles of men and women's relationships for it discarded the stereotyped gender-roles of male dominance and female subordination to a different relation more like a comradeship.¹⁴⁴ Women were required to do physical labour just like men as Morrison wants to portray in her novel.

Masculinity is also one of the key aspects challenged in the novel, mainly through the all-female household at 124 which gradually destroys itself. Paul D as the only man brave enough to enter this house does not embody the characteristically male attributes, he is rather sensitive and occupies the nurturing role, by which Morrison presents an alternative to traditional constructions of masculinity.¹⁴⁵ He is the man in whose presence women allow themselves to release their emotions and cry, just as Sethe and Denver who shed tears in his presence, relieving themselves of some of the sorrow and pain.¹⁴⁶

Contrariwise, Halle whose masculine qualities purchase freedom for his mother, Baby Suggs, who is no longer able to work on the plantations, serves as an opposite example of manhood. However, his manliness is also questioned because, apart from his respect and reverence for

¹⁴² RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, s. 44.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 47

¹⁴⁴ CHAKRAVARTY, Radha. Lethal Love and Haunted Houses: The maternal problematic in Toni Morrison. *BRAC University Journal*. Delhi University, India, 2004, 1(2), 17.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, s. 52.

his mother, he also showed helplessness and frustration in a situation where he witnesses an attack on his wife and is unable to help her.

When a black female slave cannot perform labour on the plantation, she was placed in her owner's household. The position of black women in a white household consisted mostly of representing the maternal role, as documented in *The Bluest Eye* too. In *Beloved*, Sethe is attacked and robbed of her milk like a cow by the nephews suggesting the historical position of slave women in a racist economy as nurses for white children but treated as animals.¹⁴⁷

Morrison complicates the master-slave relationship on the plantation by portraying two contradictory examples of slave masters. On one hand, Mr. Garner as a benevolent slave-master who wants his slaves to be rather men than animals and treats them as male human beings, on the other hand, for the schoolteacher his slaves are not worthier than animals on the farm.¹⁴⁸ Like her husband, Mrs. Garner is soft-hearted and does not misbehave with the people serving on their plantation. She gives Sethe earrings for her wedding which she sews into the seam of her dress. According to Raynaud, Sethe's muteness and the growth on her neck towards the end of her life „translate the inner corruption of the system and echo Paul D's forced voicelessness through the wearing of the bit.” (Raynaud, 2007, p. 47)

The character of Sixo, Paul D's closest friend at Sweet Home, reflects the conflict between humanity and animality that is omnipresent in the novel. As the only slave at Sweet Home with an experience of being a free man, Sixo is able to assist Sethe with healing Howard's, her son's, thumb. As such, his identity is formed based on living a life and his experiences are derived from the exercise of free will. It is Sixo, who, rather than limiting himself to sexual release with cows, finds a woman, the Thirty-Mile Woman, on another farm with whom he falls in love and builds relationship.¹⁴⁹ When Sethe is bathed by Paul D, he remembers Sixo's words about the woman he loved: „She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am,” which suggests he was a respectful and not too proud man.

One day, Sixo steals a pig and when asked by the schoolteacher about the theft he says that since they are both a property, he was not stealing, but rather enriching the wealth of the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 46

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 47

¹⁴⁹ GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Beloved*. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 29. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

farm.¹⁵⁰ The schoolteacher still does not understand, so Sixo further explains: „Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work.“ (Morrison, 2016, p. 224) The schoolteacher finds the idea clever, but beats him anyway to remind him that definitions belong to the definers, not the defined.

When the slaves attempt to escape from Sweet Home, Paul D and Sixo are caught, Paul D is sent to Alfred Georgia because the schoolteacher thinks he can still do the hard work and thus be useful. Sixo, on the contrary, begins to sing at the moment they are captured by the white men. They tie him at the waist to a tree and start a fire, intending to burn him alive, just as they would cook a pig for dinner, but he laughs and keeps singing “Seven-O! Seven-O!”. The white men cannot stand his singing and shoot him in order to shut him up. It was his trust and devotion to African culture that freed him from the suffering he would feel if he were to die by being burned alive.

Self-awareness and identity

In the racist economy each slave has an owner and a prize just like goods that are exchanged. But selfhood is only possible when one does own oneself and can make decisions of one’s own free will.¹⁵¹ All the women living in the house at 124 Bluestone Road had to become aware of themselves and learn how to love and value themselves. As for Denver, she is an innocent girl, Sethe’s daughter, who is well taken care of at the beginning of the novel. Going through the phases of misunderstanding the world that surrounds her, befriending her sister’s ghost, jealousy of Beloved who gets more attention and love from their mother, Denver finally realizes who the real villain is and learns how to love herself and those around her. Morrison uses the ritual of speaking to define the moment of Denver becoming whole and a proper member of her community by learning its discourse.¹⁵²

Thinner, steady in the eyes, she looked more like Halle than ever. She was the first to smile. “Good morning, Mr. D.”, “Well, it is now.” Her smile, no longer the sneer he

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 25

¹⁵¹ RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. *Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory*. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, s. 53.

¹⁵² ATKINSON, Yvonne, ed. *Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison*. In: CONNOR, Marc C. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, c2000, s. 29. ISBN 1-57806-284-5.

remembered, had welcome in it and strong traces of Sethe's mouth. (Morrison, 2016, p. 313)

Denver's relationship with Paul D improves as Denver grows up and becomes more mature, knowing her self-worth. When Paul D questions Beloved's identity as Denver's sister, Denver does not need him to tell her his opinion on the situation, but rather makes up her own: „He licked his lips. “Well, if you want my opinion—”, “I don't,” she said. “I have my own.”, “You grown,” he said. “Yes, sir.”. (Morrison, 2016, p. 314)

Perhaps the most mysterious figure is Beloved herself representing not only Sethe's dead daughter, but also the collective sorrow of the “Sixty Million and more” who perished during the Middle Passage.¹⁵³ The baffling character of Beloved supports the openness to reader's interpretation; based on her fluid identity, she could be seen as a demon, a supernatural entity, that needs to be exorcised or as a healing force for the two main protagonists who then realize the importance of dealing with the repressed problems from their past.¹⁵⁴

Sethe is pictured as a potential heroic figure by demonstrating her personal commitment and sacrifice, but her willingness to face the future is contrasted with the unwillingness to examine the past¹⁵⁵, as depicted in this excerpt:

“I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running—from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth.” (Morrison, 2016, p. 18)

Missing the companionship of other women from the community, Sethe lacks critical sources of knowledge. It is impossible for her to know what kind of person she might become without being able to make decisions for herself, she is not given the opportunity to explore her abilities to be a good wife, mother, or friend.¹⁵⁶ The turning point in Sethe's process of building her own identity occurred during the 28 days of freedom she has once she arrives at 124. She

¹⁵³ CHAKRAVARTY, Radha. Lethal Love and Haunted Houses: The maternal problematic in Toni Morrison. *BRAC University Journal*. Delhi University, India, 2004, 1(2), 15.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in *Beloved*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 154. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

¹⁵⁶ GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Beloved*. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 29. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

has a chance to get to know people from the community and to finally spend time with and take care of her children.¹⁵⁷

Sethe has to undergo three rituals in order to overcome the sense of desecration – initiating, mediating, and culminating.¹⁵⁸ The first ritual of initiation is performed by Stamp Paid who helps his initiates to confront the internalized pain and anger that left unresolved will thwart their future destinies.¹⁵⁹ The mediating ritual is conducted by Paul D who reconnects Sethe to the community by taking her and Denver to the carnival. By bringing a view of his past to Sethe, he encourages her to continue on her own journey of confronting some of the horror from her own locked up past.¹⁶⁰

Last rites establish the suitable conditions for rebirth and regeneration. They occur when Denver recognizes the threat of Beloved's greedy love by which her mother is being consumed and obeys Baby Suggs's advice telling her, "Go on out the yard. Go on." (Morrison, 2016, p. 288) Denver determined to find help in the community leaves the house and the liminal space of the porch and embarks on the journey of personal healing that ultimately leads to the communal cleansing.¹⁶¹ The crucial part of the last ritual resembles a burial. Albert J. Raboteau notes the importance of burial rites by saying that, „improper or incomplete funeral rites may interfere or delay the entrance of the deceased into the spiritual world and may cause his soul to linger about as restless and malevolent ghost." (Raboteau, 1978, p. 13)

Sethe arrives at the conclusion that even if she forgets certain things, she will be eaten up by the past and consumed by her memory, because the true process of mourning is about letting go of the loss and Beloved's ghost illustrates Sethe's refusal of her daughter's death.¹⁶² She finally understands she has to acknowledge and forgive herself in order to move forward in life, and she realizes that „the past can only be reoriginated as past from the vantage point of the present moment." (Raynaud, 2007, p. 50)

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 22

¹⁵⁸ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in Beloved. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 162. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 164

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, s. 50.

During the interview with Mavis Nicholson from 1988, Morrison stressed the role of forgiveness saying that at some point people have to forgive, and if they don't, they're in a 'cul-de-sac' and have to experience the full fall and the complete self-loathing in order to come around to something like forgiving themselves. Not if they skip responsibility, or when they use a substitute emotion like guilt, but if they feel the real emotion which is shame, hatred, humiliation, and self-loathing that is the door, and if they get through that door, then they can forgive themselves. Morrison pushes her characters to this place where all of the definitions about themselves are suspicious – to the point they are stripped down and lean, and only after that they can see who they truly are and then they make peace. Morrison finds this process inevitable and necessary, otherwise people would never arrive at the delicious place called adulthood.

Love, womanhood, and motherhood

Love is a force that constantly interferes in our lives and influences them as well as the lives of the novel's characters. The kind of love that is highlighted in the novel is self-love, including loving one's body even if it is marked by slavery.

The love between Paul D and Sethe serves as a healing force because by touching Sethe's body, bathing her, and making love to her, Paul D encourages her to start loving herself and her own body too.¹⁶³ However, it is rather difficult for Sethe to love her body when she had to trade it with an engraver in an exchange for seven letters, B-E-L-O-V-E-D, carved into a burial stone.¹⁶⁴

Paul D asks Sethe to have a baby with him which scares her, because she realizes the responsibility it will entail: „Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, that caring—again.” (Morrison, 2016, p. 155) She then acts aloof and tries to build a case against him and a case against getting pregnant, even though she is a little ashamed of it, but she feels like she has all the children she needed.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 51

¹⁶⁴ GILLESPIE, Carmen. Beloved. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 20. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

¹⁶⁵ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage, 2016, p. 156. ISBN 9780099760115.

Paul D loves Sethe so much he cannot believe she would be capable of killing her children and leaves her. This act points to the difference in male and female perspectives and the misunderstanding that often occurs between men and women, as the following excerpt shows.:

„Hearing the three of them [Sethe, Denver, Beloved] laughing at something he wasn't in on. The code they used among themselves that he could not break...They were a family somehow and he was not the head of it.” (Morrison, 2016, p. 155)

A mother will still see her child as a child, even if they grow up and start families of their own. A mother's love does not allow a mother to stop taking an interest in her children's lives, caring of them, or protecting them, it is a bond that is unbreakable for the rest of her life, something that men often do not understand, as depicted in this excerpt.:

“I don't care what she [Denver] is. Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that supposed to mean? In my heart it don't mean anything.”, “It means she has to take it if she acts up. You can't protect her every minute. (Morrison, 2012, p. 54)

Breastfeeding, as an essential part of motherhood, has also been denied to Sethe which leaves her even more traumatized. She keeps repeating that they took her milk, recalling the horrible act of the nephews and the schoolteacher sucking her breasts to take away her milk.

The bond between a mother and a daughter cannot be broken even in the worst possible scenario. When Beloved comes back to Sethe, she feels redeemed by thinking she gave her a second chance.¹⁶⁶ Instead of the loving atmosphere one would expect, the whole house is inhabited by desire to rather explain and justify. Sethe does not expect the encounter with Beloved to turn out so badly, she just wants to love her more and explain why she killed her, but of course the child does not understand at all, Beloved only accuses Sethe of leaving her behind.:

„Sethe never came to her, never said a word to her, never smiled and worst of all never waved goodbye or even looked her way before running away from her.” (Morrison, 2016, p. 284)

¹⁶⁶ GILLESPIE, Carmen. Beloved. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 25. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

Sethe pleads Beloved for forgiveness and lists again and again her reasons showing how deep a mother's love can be; she says, she would trade places any day, give up on her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved's tears.¹⁶⁷

The recollection of the dreadful memories from Sethe's life forms the bridge necessary for her healing.¹⁶⁸ The symbolism of the bridge represents that Sethe's life is situated as much in the present as it is in the past.¹⁶⁹ The word "bridge" is crucial to Morrison's worldview: "The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the present and the past does not exist. It's bridged for us by assuming responsibility for people no one's ever assumed responsibility for." (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 247)

Ownership and possession are concepts explored in the novel in relation to love as well, primarily in that kind of motherhood and mother-daughter bond between Sethe and Beloved. In the end of the novel, Beloved's voice explains that possession and dispossession are the same by saying: "I am Beloved and she is mine". Sethe loves her daughter so much that she wants to give her everything she longs for, but she loses herself in the exchange with Beloved and grows very thin while Beloved blooms.¹⁷⁰

When discussing the novel with Marsha Darling, Morrison says, that it tells a story about the tension between being yourself, one's own Beloved, and being a mother¹⁷¹, which is something Black women were robbed of. Sethe's act of killing her daughter does not symbolize a rejection of the maternal role, but rather an excessive, distorted reaffirmation of the mother right that slavery has denied her as well as the access to the institutions that would help her protect her children from slavery in non-violent way.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage, 2016, p. 284. ISBN 9780099760115.

¹⁶⁸ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in *Beloved*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 149. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

¹⁶⁹ NORA, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." In FABRE Geneviève and O'MEALLY Robert, ed.: *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, 285. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53

¹⁷¹ CHAKRAVARTY, Radha. Lethal Love and Haunted Houses: The maternal problematic in Toni Morrison. *BRAC University Journal*. Delhi University, India, 2004, 1(2), 16.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

By using a white female character, Amy Denver, Morrison demonstrates the pervasiveness of women's oppression across the barriers of race.¹⁷³ Amy assists Sethe at her childbirth, tries to calm and comfort her which again shows the emancipatory potential of female bonding.¹⁷⁴

In the novel, love is not only viewed as romantic, but also as a murderous force. Sethe wants to free Beloved from the hell she would probably experience as a slave but paradoxically ends up becoming an instrument of hell herself by killing her own daughter.

Memory and 'rememory'

Memories of the individual characters are the central building blocks of the novel since the author uses fragmented memories of the past to compose the whole story. Some of them are repressed and the characters attempt to erase them, but it is impossible.

Emotions play an important role in unblocking memories because the process of remembering and making peace takes love.¹⁷⁵ On the individual level, the characters move from refusing to acknowledge the past to confronting and coming to terms with the pain which is made bearable through retelling.¹⁷⁶ The surge of memory cannot be blocked because it works unconsciously and its logic is not that of the rational mind or the will, but that of emotions.¹⁷⁷

Mavis Nicholson, who interviewed Morrison in 1988, says that Morrison uses a lot of ancestral memory in her books and asks her whether she believes that ancestors can somehow pass through us, and we then retain the memory. Morrison answers that she does believe in that, even though she was discouraged from such thoughts as a child and even later during her studies.

Situated in 1873, *Beloved* deals with the recollections of what people remember, i.e. the memory of slavery.¹⁷⁸ Beloved's identity is difficult to define, however, she represents a poetic burial stone for the "Sixty Million and more". „The final "Beloved" is also addressed to the

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. *Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory*. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, s. 48.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 43

readers, thus brought into a communion around the grief of a mother, a family, a people, a nation.” (Raynaud, 2007, p. 45)

The term ‘rememory’ shows Morrison’s use of specific vocabulary common to all her novels. According to Jason J. Campbell, there are two key distinctions between memory and “rememory”. The first divergence between those concepts lies in facticity; the experience of an event, or person, or story called as “rememory” cannot be denied though it can be forgotten. (p. 1) The second key distinction is the intersubjectivity of “rememory” meaning not merely that the characters remember the brutal events of Sweet Home and 124 Bluestone, but that they shared in this collective experience. (p. 1) This intersubjectivity and interconnectedness between the characters, especially Sethe and Beloved, serve as a foundation for their “rememory”.

As Ashraf Rushdy writes, the readers also share in the rememory of the fictional characters by claiming that, these “rememories” are available to anyone who enters the sphere of the action and that “rememory” is never only personal but always interpersonal.¹⁷⁹

Claudine Raynaud highlights Sethe’s memory bringing back the beauty of the landscape along with the horror: “Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world.” She further points out the ambivalence of memory and its “double-edgedness” through Beloved’s character as well, when she recalls the trees bringing a certain aesthetics but also containing the horror of lynching.¹⁸⁰

Memory is kept alive by storytelling while, conversely, untold stories must be told for repressed memories to emerge.¹⁸¹ For African people a loss of memory is not negotiable, as Cornell West explains, African Americans have been “the Americans who could not not know.”¹⁸² However, shortly after Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize she remarked in a *Time* magazine interview that the enslavement of African people is something that no one wants to remember, „the characters don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember,

¹⁷⁹ RUSHDY, Ashraf H. A. “Rememory”: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison’s Novels. *Contemporary Literature*. 1990, 31(3), 303-304.

¹⁸⁰ RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, s. 49.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in Beloved. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 147. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

white people don't want to remember. I mean it's national amnesia."¹⁸³ Baby Suggs contrasts the triviality of memory and the loss of her children by saying that all she can remember is how the first born out of her 8 children loved "the burned bottom of bread".¹⁸⁴

Another aspect related to memory are the body marks of the slaves or formerly enslaved characters in the novel. Sethe can remember her mother showing her a body mark so she could easily recognize her mother's dead body if needed.¹⁸⁵ Sethe does not yet understand what is hidden behind the mark and asks her mother to mark her too, but she is slapped by her and confused by the whole situation. She only understands it when she herself is marked on her back with a tree by the schoolteacher's nephew who whips her very hard when she is pregnant.¹⁸⁶ Sethe chides herself for not remembering the signs—fingernail prints—that she purposely marks on Beloved's forehead when she immolates her in the shed.¹⁸⁷ The marking on Beloved's forehead is a site of memory which confirms her identity as Sethe's daughter.¹⁸⁸

Water serves as a metaphor for remembrance in the novel.¹⁸⁹ The recurring image of water in the characters' memories emphasizes the value of water in the process of cleansing, healing, and regeneration. According to African and African American culture, Sethe's reference to the river in the novel symbolizes a rite of passage, a place of memory, and a place for spiritual initiation.¹⁹⁰

The women of the community castigated the inhabitants of 124, but eventually they realize that Baby Suggs provided help to each of them along their way.¹⁹¹ And so at the end of the novel they raise their voices, the same voices they formerly used for gossiping about the three

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 148

¹⁸⁴ RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. *Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory*. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, s. 49.

¹⁸⁵ SARITA a Ravindra KUMAR. Trauma of Slavery and Injustice: A Study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *International Research Journal of Management Sociology & Humanity* [online]. 2014, 2014, 5(10), 61 [cit. 2023-03-27]. ISSN 2277-9809. Dostupné z: doi:<https://doi.org/10.32804/IRJMSSH>

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in *Beloved*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, s. 160. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 157

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 164

women occupying the house, to protect them. „Disarmed by the memories of 124 and Baby Suggs, they move from “rememory” to redemption.” (Zauditu-Selassie, 2009, p. 165)

In Zauditu-Selassie’s view, forgetting and memory are twin activities because one has to forget something to remember something else.¹⁹² Memory acknowledges that some selection process has occurred, as in the novel, where the characters forget *Beloved* like a bad dream, “quickly and deliberately”, because “remembering seemed unwise”, they used similar word masks that cover the intentional memory of *Beloved*.¹⁹³

Zauditu-Selassie further works with triadic structure in terms of the house number occupied by *Sethe*, *Denver* and *Beloved*, the house at 124 Bluestone Road. The missing number three is perhaps not an actual omission since our minds insist upon making closure and insert it anyway, which according to Zauditu-Selassie symbolizes the adjustment African people had to make to survive and the missing pieces they had to supply in order to remain whole, meaning family members, memories, and other crucial elements.¹⁹⁴

The symbolism of trees

The trees are not the symbols of healing and freedom, but rather of pain because of *Sethe*’s scar in the shape of a chokecherry tree, the trees hiding the horror of *Sweet Home*, and the woods in which slaves died.¹⁹⁵ When *Sethe* narrates her story, she tries to recall another memory than that of being abused and her milk being taken away, but *Paul D* is curious as to how she got the scar on her back, so he asks *Sethe* what happened.:

„After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn’t speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.” (Morrison, 2016, p. 19-20)

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 146

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 153

¹⁹⁵ ILIČEVIĆ, Irena. *Trees as a Symbol of Trauma in Morrison's Beloved* [online]. Osijek, 2019 [cit. 2023-03-28]. Dostupné z: https://www.academia.edu/43094064/Trees_as_a_Symbol_of_Trauma_in_Morrison's_Beloved. Academic writing. Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek. Vedoucí práce Dr. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, p. 1.

Amy Denver, the white girl, is the character to whom Sethe's scar resembles a chokecherry tree, chokecherry trees in fact bear poisonous fruit and grow mainly in the former American centres of slavery.¹⁹⁶ Although Amy has a positive impact on Sethe's life, this metaphor intensifies the revulsion white people feel towards slaves, and black people in general.¹⁹⁷

In case of Sixo and Paul A, trees are associated with death too. Tjernerger mentions that Sixo is tied to a tree and destined to be burned alive, and Paul A is hanged from a tree.¹⁹⁸ Contrariwise, Denver finds refuge in the woods as she escapes from 124. References and play on words which Morrison uses are also connected to trees, such as the description of Halle's inability to protect Sethe by saying, that it broke him down like a twig.¹⁹⁹

Paul D loves to be surrounded by trees, he perceives them as inviting, things he can trust and be near, talk to them if he wants to as he frequently did during his midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home.²⁰⁰ As written in the book, „Sweet Home had more pretty trees than any farm around.” (Morrison, 2016, p. 25) This could indicate that these beautiful trees symbolize the curtains hiding and masking the horrors that took place in Sweet Home along with the darkness of slavery.²⁰¹

The African culture and the afterlife

For Sethe, the absence of her mother while growing-up and the impossibility to take care of her own children signifies separation from her black cultural heritage.²⁰² Baby Suggs is the replacement for Sethe's mother who can teach her knowledge of traditional practices, provide a sense of spiritual and cultural continuity, and thus show her how to become part of the community.²⁰³

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 2

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 3

²⁰⁰ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage, 2016, p. 25. ISBN 9780099760115.

²⁰¹ ILIČEVIĆ, Irena. *Trees as a Symbol of Trauma in Morrison's Beloved* [online]. Osijek, 2019 [cit. 2023-03-28]. Dostupné z: https://www.academia.edu/43094064/Trees_as_a_Symbol_of_Trauma_in_Morrisons_Beloved. Academic writing. Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek. Vedoucí práce Dr Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, p. 4.

²⁰² ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in *Beloved*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, p. 160. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 157

The motif of the black community as a cohesive unit appears significantly in this novel. It is most transparent in the character of Baby Suggs who does not give up on her life, not until Sethe's horrible act of killing her daughter which affected Baby Suggs deeply. She is courageous and strong enough not to be destroyed by the peculiar system originally designed to destroy black slaves.²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Baby Suggs knows and remembers where she comes from and keeps her name even after she gains freedom because she hopes that her husband might be able to find her someday.²⁰⁵ By keeping her name and looking for her six children, she did not have a chance to spend time with she strengthens the family bond.

Morrison combines myth and the remembered history in her novel, the use of traditional oral form of transmitting memories from generation to generation assures spiritual and cultural continuity.²⁰⁶ Baby Suggs as a spiritual roots worker and preacher who regularly holds sermons in the woods and the characters invoke Baby Suggs's memory to ask for assistance, again emphasizing the importance of keeping in touch with the ancestors, otherwise the characters would be lost.²⁰⁷ The wood is metaphorically a place dense with spirits, an abode for invisible powers.²⁰⁸ Baby Suggs led "every black man, woman, and child" to the "Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods". (Morrison, 2016, p. 102)

The sermons that Baby Suggs holds are not defined only by Christian sentiments, but also by African spiritual sensibilities accompanied by the invocation of self-affirming statements.²⁰⁹ Baby Suggs leads people to deliverance in the wilderness and through her pleas she empowers the community members to break down the barriers which hold them back from love and life.²¹⁰ Morrison claims Baby Suggs was born in Africa armed with proverbs, songs, folktales,

²⁰⁴ MCKENZIE, Marilyn Mobley. Spaces for readers: the novels of Toni Morrison. In: GRAHAM, Maryemma, ed. *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 229. ISBN 978-0-511-22179-8.

²⁰⁵ GILLESPIE, Carmen. Beloved. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, p. 24. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

²⁰⁶ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in Beloved. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, p. 149. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

²⁰⁷ MORRISON, Toni. Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation. In EVANS, Mari, ed. *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*, 344. New York: Anchor Books, 1984.

²⁰⁸ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in Beloved. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, p. 158. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 159

and religious beliefs; however, she becomes silent because she is unable to either deal with or accept the abomination of life.²¹¹

One morning Baby Suggs senses a discontent but cannot tell where the source of it lies, then she has another premonition that something dangerous is about to happen, suggesting her as a fortune teller, a character typical of African tribal culture.²¹² Later on, the schoolteacher along with three other men come for Sethe and her children to take her back to slavery, which is the moment in which Sethe realizes, she is never coming back and would not let her children be enslaved and decides to put them where she thought they would be safe, on the other side of this life.²¹³ Denver, as an infant, is saved from death by Stamp Paid and Beloved is killed.

When Paul D is held prisoner in Alfred, Georgia, he becomes a part of the chain gang, enchained male slaves held prisoners in underground boxes resembling graves.²¹⁴ Their bond through the chain makes individual plight dependent on the plight of the whole group of men.²¹⁵ The only form of the men's salvation is their communication through the songs they sing as they work; songs about their lives, their longings, and their loves, and, through this ritual, they preserve their humanity.²¹⁶ Similar is the case with women from the local community to which songs serve as a control of the discourse of their lives- At the novel's end they sing a song "wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees" as they try to exorcise the unruly spirit.²¹⁷

Denver feels lost at the beginning of the novel, where she spends all her time inside the house without the slightest contact with the community. She says: "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either." (Morrison, 2016, p. 17) She believes the haunted house to

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ GILLESPIE, Carmen. Beloved. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, p. 25. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

²¹⁴ RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, p. 55.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ GILLESPIE, Carmen. Beloved. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, p. 23. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

²¹⁷ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in Beloved. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, p. 156. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

be the reason why no one visits them. Later in the novel, she is encouraged by her grandma's voice to leave the house and seek help from women in the community.

The other fictional characters appearing in the novel do not know Beloved's name which according to African perspective would leave her nameless in the spirit world.²¹⁸ She would also remain nameless to the community for Sethe did not socially incorporate her.²¹⁹ Morrison attempts to retrieve the lost contents of culture and to mitigate the trespass and the anonymity of African people by connecting the character Beloved to the unnamed "sixty million or more."²²⁰

Africans used to follow the seasons and cycles in nature, and the author of the novel tried to indicate this in her novel as well. When the characters plan on escaping Sweet Home, they know they have to remember that Sethe is pregnant in spring and that by August she may not be able to keep up with the group of men, who can only carry her children, but not her.²²¹ In the animal kingdom, females are also usually pregnant in the spring and give birth to their young in the summer.

Denver and Beloved's relationship and spiritual connection is, according to African old traditions, solidified by the exchange of blood between them, because Denver sucks milk from her mother's breasts along with Beloved's, her sister's, blood.²²²

Another example of the characters' connection to their ancestors and the primitive roots is through Sixo, who is tied up with the stock on the night of the planned escape, so he keeps a nail in his mouth to help him undo the rope when he has to.²²³

The connection with our ancestors is further depicted through the tree stump, which is an important symbol in the novel, it is there that the ghost appears. As Morrison stated in the interview with Mavis Nicholson, it is not based on fairy tales and folk tradition, but on her own mother's personal experience from her childhood in the south. Her mother and her aunt were

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 145

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 146

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage, 2016, p. 263. ISBN 9780099760115

²²² ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in *Beloved*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, p. 160. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

²²³ Ibid.

playing in the woods and saw a woman on a stump—their aunt—so they ran towards her with enthusiasm, calling her names. She slowly looked at them and began to moan, and they suddenly got terribly frightened and would not go any closer because she was behaving strangely. They ran home to tell their mother only to learn that the woman they saw was really a ghost of their aunt who had just died.

Moreover, the novel explores a possible way of removing the burden of the past through African traditions, through ritual and performance.²²⁴ Morrison perceives music as an inherent part of the black culture, as well as generosity and openness. Lyricism can be felt in her writing too, she uses different colours to describe feelings of the characters and their sense of belonging as in the following excerpts.:

Excerpt 1: „He [Stamp Paid] kept the ribbon; the skin smell nagged him, and his weakened marrow made him dwell on Baby Suggs’s wish to consider what in the world was harmless. He hoped she stuck to blue, yellow, maybe green, and never fixed on red.” (Morrison, 2016, p. 213)

Excerpt 2: „Sethe looked at her hands, her bottle-green sleeves, and thought how little color there was in the house and how strange that she had not missed it the way Baby did. Deliberate, she thought, it must be deliberate, because the last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl. After that she became as color conscious as a hen. ... Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. There was something wrong with that. It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it.” (Morrison, 2016, p. 46)

Keeping the African traditions alive, the ceremonies which Baby Suggs held always included singing and music in general which is typical of African rituals. Sethe recalls those sermons in the Clearing a couple of times after her mother-in-law’s death. At the sermons, people had a space to repair the ruptures of their past, the act of dancing also permitted them to free their bodies from trauma imposed by slavery’s limited opportunity for mobility.²²⁵

²²⁴ RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. *Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory*. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, p. 44.

²²⁵ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in Beloved*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, p. 158. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

Dance enables a smooth transition in religious worship in America and represents a primary vehicle used to store sacred information.²²⁶ Sethe does not remember where she comes from but remembers song and dance and her mother's native language and her special body mark.²²⁷ It is also a song that persuades her of Beloved's true identity. When Beloved begins to hum a tune that Sethe knows, it confirms her that this woman-child is her dead child come back to life because she knows the melody of the lullaby Sethe created for her children.²²⁸

According to African traditions, nothing ever dies, including memory or rather "rememory" which is something that can be forgotten, but not denied. As Gillespie wrote it, it is a tangible presence of the past in everyday experience.²²⁹ Black people traditionally believe in the afterlife, as depicted through Sethe's character who believes her children will go to a better place if she kills them.

Morrison's language is rich in oxymoron, such as the statement about Paul D: „The box had done what Sweet Home had not, what working like an ass and living like a dog had not: drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind.“ (Morrison, 2016, p. 49) She also uses paradoxical statements, like: „What's going to happen when you die?“, "Nothing! I'll protect her [Denver] while I'm live and I'll protect her when I ain't.“ (Morrison, 2012, p. 54) This passage highlights Sethe's belief in the afterlife, the continuity of life beyond the physical realm.²³⁰

Magical reality

Realistic elements overlap with the fantastical in *Beloved*, as documented in the following examples. One of the most shocking scenes is when the Beloved is pregnant with Paul D's child towards the end of the novel, making it impossible for a ghost to become pregnant in the real world.²³¹

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 155

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 154

²²⁸ GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Beloved*. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, p. 25. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 21

²³⁰ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *Living with the Dead: Memory and Ancestral Presence in Beloved*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, p. 150. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

²³¹ RAYNAUD, Claudine, ed. *Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory*. In: TALLY, Justine. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, c2007, p. 53.

Beloved's character is based on the African belief in magic and magical reality, specifically in a possibility of a dead daughter living alongside her living mother. The nature of her character can also be likened to that of a vampire for she has so overtaken Sethe that she might kill her. Sethe killed her daughter who comes back to avenge that excessive love, she swallows her mother who becomes her daughter's baby.²³²

Beloved also takes on some ghost-like qualities like the ability to appear and disappear. Denver is sure about Beloved being her sister and lives in dread that she will disappear and leave her alone again because she does vanish one day while the girls play in the keeping house, only to reappear again.²³³

When asked about the ghost presence and what inspired her to put it into the novel, Morrison stated that the ghost's presence is not only because African people traditionally believe in ghosts and Sethe needs the ghost, but it is also structurally a way to say that memory can come and sit right next to you at the table and even though you do not want to remember and you are trying very hard not to remember, it's always there, always with you.

THE ANALYSIS OF *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

This chapter will focus on the background of writing *God Help the Child*, its synopsis, key symbols, and themes, and also a comparison of the personalities and traumas of the characters with those of her previous successful novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*.

Background

God Help the Child, Morrison's last novel, published in 2015, bears curious replications of where she began in her first novel published in 1970, as she revisits the theme of childhood trauma in relation to the experiences of the child's parents.²³⁴ She elaborates the motifs of subalternity and racism, womanhood and motherhood, and memory present in almost all her

²³² Ibid., p. 54

²³³ GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Beloved*. In: GILLESPIE, Carmen. *Critical companion to Toni Morrison: a literary reference to her life and work*. New York: Facts On File, c2008, s. 23. ISBN 978-0-8160-6276-8.

²³⁴ YAN, MA. a Liu LI-HUI. Making of the body: Childhood trauma in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Academicjournals: Journal of Languages and Culture* [online]. c2017, March, 2017, **8**(3), 18 [cit. 2023-03-31]. ISSN 2141-6540. Dostupné z: doi:10.5897/JLC2016.0416

previous novels. The comparison and analysis of the depiction of the separate themes and motifs will be provided in the particular chapters.

Morrison changed her writing style to a modern way of writing, meaning she employed elements, such as informal English and contractions in order to prove that subalternity and racism are still existing issues today.²³⁵ Sweetness, one of the characters in *God Help the Child*, uses double negation indicating informal American English by saying: "I never did convince him that I ain't never, ever fooled around with another man." (Morrison, 2015, p. 5) In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison used only 3rd person narrators which indicates that Pecola's trauma makes it impossible for her to speak, whereas the last novel is narrated by multiple 1st person narrators, even by the main protagonist, Bride, who as an adult reflects her childhood and the process of forming her identity.

The novel's title is also significant, in the novel the statement, 'God help the child', serves as a prayer for an unborn baby that would hopefully be "immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath." (Morrison, 2015, p. 175) By writing this piece, Morrison reminded people of the world they are living in, that is still affected by racism and patriarchy and expresses her hopes for better future. As Gras puts it, she "prompts us to think about the future of our children and suggests that, if there is to be any, we need to start acknowledging that we still do not live in a post-patriarchal or post-racial society."²³⁶

As for the novel's genre, critics argue that it notably carries features of the jazz novel, including multiple perspectives, nonlinear and non-chronological storytelling, music and dancing, the changing rhythm of the passages and the use of colours, black, white, and yellow in particular.²³⁷ Walton Muyumba characterizes the novel as a "tragicomic jazz opera" in four parts with a choral prelude; he also adds that it is difficult to read the book without recalling Billie Holiday's song 'God Bless the Child', suggesting that a definite trace of the jazz interest

²³⁵ MASHAQL, Sahar Abdelkarim Asad a Kifah Ali Al OMARI. A Postcolonial Approach to the Problem of Subalternity in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* [online]. 2012, January 5, 2018, 7(1), 179 [cit. 2023-03-31]. Dostupné z: doi:aiac.ijalel.v.7n.1p.177

²³⁶ GRAS, Delphine. "Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*." *Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2016, p. 16. Dostupné z: doi:10.3390/h5040080

²³⁷ KOVÁCS, Ágnes Zsófia. "Black is Beautiful": Black Atlantic Experience and The Black Female Body in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015). In: RÉKA, Cristian, Dragon ZOLTÁN a András LÉNÁRT. *Transnational Americas: Home(s), Borders, and Transgressions*. Szeged: Americana Ebooks, 2019, s. 5.

is present in the novel.²³⁸ Moreover, one of the novel's characters, Booker, plays the trumpet in order to escape his terrible memory.

Morrison's novels usually tell stories that should not be passed on, referred to as cautionary tales or stories, meaning they should not be repeated in the future. Some of the fictional characters from her books overcome their trauma or obstacles in order to experience self-awareness necessary for self-love and self-growth. Despite the emotional neglect in childhood, the protagonist of *God Help the Child*, Lula Ann Bridewell, realizes her worth, and by the end of the novel feels loved, happy, and ready to take on the role of mother. Therefore, this novel can be characterized as 'bildungsroman'.

Synopsis

God Help the Child is set in the contemporary American society of the 21st century. It tells a story about the main character's coming of age complicated by childhood trauma and neglect. The protagonist Bride, a twenty-three-year-old woman, is a beautiful successful regional manager for a cosmetic company starting her own cosmetic line and a new life with her boyfriend Booker.²³⁹ Through flashbacks to her past, the reader learns about her childhood, especially the absence of maternal love and affection. The lack of fulfilment of the basic psychological needs brings troubles to her adolescence and later life, as she has a problem with building relationships with other people, with her self-confidence, and due to her very dark complexion, she has to face racist allusions to her appearance.

She tries to compensate for her lack of love by being obedient and even lies, as she convicts an innocent woman, Sofia Huxley, only to be praised or caressed by her mother. Later, however, she realizes her guilt and regrets her act and tries to make amends. But she does not meet with a positive reaction, she is also psychologically frustrated because of the departure of her friend Booker, leaving her with the words "You not the woman I want" (Morrison, 2015, p. 8). And so, she realizes that her career is not as important as relationships and tries to find the root of her pain and frustration and a way to heal it.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ WANG, Liting. An Analysis of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* from the Perspective of Trauma Theory. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*. Atlantic Press, 2019, **378**, 844.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

Bride does not understand the reasons why Booker left her and therefore embarks on a journey to Whiskey land, away from the luxurious city, to find out more about him. Nevertheless, her car crashes, and she has to wait until a “small bone-white face appeared at the passenger’s side window” (Morrison, 2015, p. 83), she is finally rescued by Rain and her foster parents Evelyn and Steeve, who take good care of Rain after her own mother threw her out on the streets. Eventually she ends up meeting Queen Olive, Booker’s aunt, as Bride later finds out. She is the person who brings these two together and forces them to confront one another and finally allow themselves to fully love each other.

Themes and symbols in *God Help the Child*

This chapter will focus on the analysis of the main themes and symbols in the novel. According to an article on *The Harvard Crimson* website, the novel’s events appear from different perspectives which creates an insightful analysis of miscommunication in female friendships, romantic relationships, and families.²⁴¹ One of the main motifs of the book is the idea of victimhood in society across race and gender lines for almost all characters in the novel experience or witness some sort of trauma.²⁴²

As Moore explains, the themes that stand out in Morrison’s novels are the heartache of a daughter spurned and belittled by her own mother, the struggle of damaged souls desperate to transcend their pasts, and child abuse, all of which appear in her last novel as well.²⁴³

Race, racism, and subalternity

As Morrison argues, racism is omnipresent even in today’s society. In *God Help the Child* she emphasises not only the difference between whites and blacks but also familiarizes the reader with the topic of a certain hierarchy among black people, where some of them are lighter than others allowing them to have more privileges than darker ones. She already outlined this idea in her first novel through the character of Maureen Peal who comes from a wealthier family

²⁴¹ ANRIG, Charlotte L.R. 'God Help the Child' a Mature Morrison Child. In: *The Harvard Crimson: The University Daily, Est. 1873* [online]. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard Crimson, c2023, April 21, 2015 [cit. 2023-03-29]. Dostupné z: <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2015/4/21/god-help-the-child/>

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ MOORE, Fernanda. God Help the Reader: Review of God Help the Child, by Toni Morrison. *Commentary* [online]. New York, 2015, **139**(4), 69 [cit. 2023-04-03]. Dostupné z: <https://www.commentary.org/articles/moore-fernanda/god-help-the-reader/>

and is lighter skinned than Pecola, which is why other people treat her better. Morrison elaborated this theme even more deeply in her last novel.

Bride is rejected by her own mother who feels ashamed of her for having too dark skin, same as with Mrs. Breedlove who has looked up in white life and rejects and neglects her own, black daughter. During Morrison's studies at Howard University, she was introduced to the idea of socially ranking people by their skin colour which was compared to the colour of a paper bag, therefore called 'the paper-bag test'.²⁴⁴ According to this test, people were divided into three groups – lighter than a paper bag, similar to the colour of the paper bag and the darker ones.²⁴⁵

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison did not picture the so-called double oppression of black women, rather she worked with the idea that racism still remains in American society but tries to show that the situation is gradually improving through white characters who help the black ones in her novels, as in case of her last novel. After the car accident, Bride is found by Rain and Steve who did not hesitate to help and take care of her despite her dark complexion. However, Rain is confused by Bride's skin colour and her foster dad explains to her, that her skin is so black, because she was born that way, there is no other reason for it.²⁴⁶ By this act he shows his tolerance and respect towards people of a different race. The same motif of whites helping blacks appears in *Beloved* as well, Amy Denver, a white girl, who helps Sethe deliver her baby and looks after her regardless of her skin colour, also embodying humanism and racial tolerance.²⁴⁷

The author focuses on white people and their community, unlike her previous novels, where the main interest was black people and especially black women. When Rain is rescued from the streets by Steve and Evelyn, and she says that she did not beg them to help her, but they did and she is grateful to them over time. Nevertheless, she says: „We're fake family—okay,

²⁴⁴ ALS, Hilton. Toni Morrison and the Ghosts in the House: From 2003: As an editor, author, and professor, Morrison has fostered a generation of black writers. *The New Yorker* [online]. New York: Condé Nast Publications, c2023, Oct 19, 2003 [cit. 2023-03-22]. Dostupné z: <https://scalar.lehigh.edu/toni-morrison/external?link=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.newyorker.com%2Fmagazine%2F2003%2F10%2F27%2Fghosts-in-the-house&prev=https%3A%2F%2Fscalar.lehigh.edu%2Ftoni-morrison%2Ftoni-morrison-biographical-note>

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ MORRISON, Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Vintage International, 2016, p.85. ISBN 9781101971949.

²⁴⁷ BOUACIDA, Soumaya. Childhood is “not a story to pass on”: Trauma and Memory Paradox in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures* [online]. 2021, 13(3), 409 [cit. 2023-04-05]. Dostupné z: https://www.academia.edu/71562699/Childhood_is_not_a_story_to_pass_on_Trauma_and_Memory_Paradox_in_Toni_Morrisons_God_Help_the_Child

but fake.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 104), by that Morrison wanted to highlight the defects of the white community, mocking the myth of the happy white family.²⁴⁸

One of the ‘Morrisonian’ themes is subalternity of human beings, especially coloured children, and females.²⁴⁹ She puts black characters at the centre of her novels to show how American society is busy eradicating racism while more serious issues like child abuse are taking place.²⁵⁰ Through *God Help the Child* she highlights the problem of children’s marginalization and aims at making other people stand up for those children, as well as for black people.²⁵¹ Bride, the novel’s protagonist, lacks self-assurance, affection, and compassion and due to her harsh childhood, she becomes subaltern.

Spivak made it clear that “the subaltern cannot speak”, but they should.²⁵² Booker wants to deal with the problem of subalternity caused by child abuse and encourages people to spread information about it. He thinks that people should be informed and well-aware about what is happening right in their community.²⁵³ When Bride confesses to him, that she saw their landlord, Mr. Leigh, abusing a little boy and she told her mother about it and she forbade her to tell anyone else, Booker tries to be understanding and says: “Now five people know. The boy, the freak, your mother, you and now me. Five is better than two but it should be five thousand.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 55)

Booker intends to write a book to give voice to African American people, who felt as subalterns and to the black community whose lives were mostly narrated by white men.²⁵⁴ His name, ‘Booker’, signifies knowledge and his contributions to the black community resembles the real person – Booker T. Washington, one of the foremost African American black activists of the

²⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 410

²⁴⁹ MOORE, Fernanda. God Help the Reader: Review of God Help the Child, by Toni Morrison. *Commentary* [online]. New York, 2015, **139**(4), 69 [cit. 2023-04-03]. Dostupné z: <https://www.commentary.org/articles/moore-fernanda/god-help-the-reader/>

²⁵⁰ MASHAQL, Sahar Abdelkarim Asad a Kifah Ali Al OMARI. A Postcolonial Approach to the Problem of Subalternity in Toni Morrison’s God Help the Child. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* [online]. 2012, January 5, 2018, **7**(1), 180 [cit. 2023-03-31]. Dostupné z: doi:aiac.ijalel.v.7n.1p.177

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid., p. 181

²⁵³ BOUACIDA, Soumaya. Childhood is “not a story to pass on”: Trauma and Memory Paradox in Toni Morrison’s God Help the Child. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures* [online]. 2021, **13**(3), 404 [cit. 2023-04-05]. Dostupné z: https://www.academia.edu/71562699/Childhood_is_not_a_story_to_pass_on_Trauma_and_Memory_Paradox_in_Toni_Morrisons_God_Help_the_Child

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 405

early 20th century. Born into slavery, he strived to continue his own education and help his whole community by improve schooling of black children.²⁵⁵ Booker, in *God Help the Child*, dreams of becoming an advocate to defend child victims of abuse and continues his education.

As Bouacida puts it, Booker is a mocking version of the black activist because he breaks after his brother's death.²⁵⁶ His brother's murder shifts Booker's course of goals, he becomes inactive entrapped in his memory which decentralizes him form the future projects he wanted to achieve.²⁵⁷ Booker then longs for be the next Louis Armstrong, the pioneer of jazz music glamorizing black culture through music, and playing a trumpet comforts him.²⁵⁸

Booker represents the voice of African culture which is occluded in Western epistemology. Morrison creates an arena where the two conflicting institutions, Americentrism and Afrocentrism, combat against each other.²⁵⁹ Through Booker's character and him continue reading when being seduced by Brooklyn, embodying Americentrism, Morrison aims at regaining power to Black people who were denied their rights in the Constitution because "Voting, after all, was inextricably connected to the ability to read". (Morrison, 1995, p. 89) Therefore, Morrison believes that literacy is power.

Morrison incorporated the concept of beauty in conjunction with race into all her novels. It is interesting to compare the concepts of depicting the theme of beauty in her first and last novel. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola despises her blackness and dreams of being white and having blue-eyes, whereas Bride in *God Help the Child* learns how to value and cherish the midnight black skin her mother rejected her for. The valuations of their bodies come from their parents, community, and society in general, suggesting that contemporary society in Morrison's last novel is portrayed as more tolerant and respectful compared to the post-war American society in which her first novel is set.

Bride works for a cosmetic company and the line named 'YOU, GIRL' featuring all possible shades of body colour shows that she is not racist like her mother and wants all women to have the opportunity to feel beautiful.²⁶⁰ Sweetness believes her daughter's skin colour will

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 406

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 405

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 407

always be significant no matter how many times she changes her name, she will always wear it like a cross.²⁶¹

Bride feels excited to discover that there are many different shades of white when shopping for an all-white outfit.: “At first it was boring shopping for white-only clothes until I learned how many shades of white there were; ivory, oyster, alabaster, paper white, snow, cream, ecru, Champagne, ghost, bone.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 33) This realization indicates a kind of hierarchy between white people as well for not all white people are snow white. It further indicates the younger generations to be more understanding and open-minded towards races than the generations directly affected by racism.

Trauma and identity

Trauma is one of the important themes in Morrison’s novels, especially the impact of racism and sexism on the characters’ self-growth and identity building process.²⁶² The central characters are usually black women and black children who experience trauma, however, in *God Help the Child* Morrison refers to a collective group trauma, i.e., almost every character in the novel experience psychological or physical abuse, rather than to individual trauma as in Pecola’s case in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*.²⁶³

When fictional characters experience a highly unusual, sudden, or catastrophic event, such as rape, the common response is to keep the violence out of their consciousness because it is an experience too horrific to talk about publicly, and thus becomes “unspeakable”.²⁶⁴ As for trauma recovery, unfortunately, most of the time the power of silence wins. Traumatic experiences are expressed in traumatic syndromes, rather than using words.²⁶⁵

As Wang puts it, people can experience traumatic events even through seeing or hearing what happens to others, as in case of Bride, who as a six-year-old girl witnesses their landlord, Mr. Leigh, sexually abusing a little white boy.²⁶⁶ Bride says that she was afraid to tell her mother

²⁶¹ MORRISON, Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Vintage International, 2016, p.7. ISBN 9781101971949.

²⁶² WANG, Liting. An Analysis of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* from the Perspective of Trauma Theory. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*. Atlantic Press, 2019, **378**, 844.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 846

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 845

about what she has seen, and that the look on the man's face scared her, so she could not move, which proves that she experienced trauma.²⁶⁷ As Caruth concludes it, shock is what causes trauma, and it works very much like a bodily threat.²⁶⁸ When she finally tells her mother, she forbids her to talk about it because she is afraid that they will lose the roof over their heads if she would report the landlord of the house, they live in, to the police. Shockingly, her mother is more concerned about keeping the incident from spreading than about the trauma of the little boy caused by rape, as depicted in the excerpt below.

„So when I told Sweetness what I'd seen, she was furious. Not about a little crying boy, but about spreading the story. She wasn't interested in tiny fists or big hairy thighs; she was interested in keeping our apartment.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 54)

Childhood trauma has a crucial impact on the quality of the child's entire life and their psychosocial development.²⁶⁹ It has long term negative effects and causes psychological problems or mental disorders to the child as they grow up. The trauma does not have to be caused by maltreatment, i.e., physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, but also by neglect and separation.²⁷⁰ Separation of the mother from the child, happened frequently in slavery, without the mother's knowledge and decision, as depicted in the case of Queen in *God Help the Child*, as well as in Baby Suggs's case in *Beloved*.

Bride's trauma

Bride's trauma is caused by physical as well as emotional neglect. Physical neglect is the failure to provide physical contact during the sensitive period of breastfeeding and cuddling, as this is what infants need to bond with their mother.²⁷¹ As her father rejected and abandoned her and her mother refused to nurse her because of her dark, blue-black or midnight black, skin, they caused a psychological damage to her. Her mother says that “nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat. I went to bottle-feeding soon as I got home.” (Morrison, 2015,

²⁶⁷ MORRISON, Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Vintage International, 2016, p.55. ISBN 9781101971949.

²⁶⁸ CARUTH, C., ed. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996.

²⁶⁹ WANG, Liting. An Analysis of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* from the Perspective of Trauma Theory. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*. Atlantic Press, 2019, **378**, 845.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

p. 5) Compared to *Beloved*, Sethe would do anything in order to be able to breastfeed her daughter, but her milk is violently taken away from her causing her great distress.

Bride's mother further increases the distance between her and her daughter by telling her not to call her "Mother" or "Mama", but "Sweetness" for it seemed safer to her.²⁷² „Being that black and having what I think are too-thick lips calling me "Mama" would confuse people.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 6) The absence of maternal love and aloof behaviour is present in Morrison's first novel as well, in which Pecola has to call her mother "Mrs. Breedlove" and is never hugged or praised by her.

Bride, as an adult, needs to deal with her childhood trauma because it keeps affecting her current life. Her body changes, making her the scared little girl once again, but the changes are rather hidden to other people, only she notices them. She is losing her pubic hair, the holes in her earlobes, her breasts are shrinking, and her period is late.²⁷³ Simply put, she loses her secondary sex characteristics and only regains them when she deals with her childhood trauma. During this process she also reinvents herself through changing her name according to the stage of the healing process she is in.

The constant changing of her name shows Bride's insecurity about her identity.²⁷⁴ She goes from Lula Ann Bridewell to Lula Ann, then to Ann Bride and finally shortens her name to just Bride. The name 'Bride' refers to someone ready for marriage, for the next chapter in life. Sometimes people have to go a long way to realize who they really are and what they want from life, and they can only do so when they overcome their past traumatic experiences. Therefore, the name 'Bride' the character uses as an adult can symbolize the end of her journey of becoming a self-reliant woman.

When writing her last novel, Morrison included a theme typical of the literary works of the 1930s, 'the American Dream' to which refer two female characters, Bride, and Raisin, also called Rain. Bride is proud of herself for what she achieved at work and enjoys the new role in

²⁷² MORRISON, Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Vintage International, 2016, p.6. ISBN 9781101971949.

²⁷³ KOVÁCS, Ágnes Zsófia. "Black is Beautiful": Black Atlantic Experience and The Black Female Body in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015). In: RÉKA, Cristian, Dragon ZOLTÁN a András LÉNÁRT. *Transnational Americas: Home(s), Borders, and Transgressions*. Szeged: Americana Ebooks, 2019, p. 4.

²⁷⁴ MASHAQL, Sahar Abdelkarim Asad a Kifah Ali Al OMARI. A Postcolonial Approach to the Problem of Subalternity in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* [online]. 2012, January 5, 2018, 7(1), 181 [cit. 2023-03-31]. Dostupné z: doi:aiac.ijalel.v.7n.1p.177

which she is looked up to. Nevertheless, Morrison wants to liberate her from the perverted spirit of the American Dream and make her stay true to her African spirit.²⁷⁵

As for Bride's trauma recovery, she has to reconcile with her blackness that is embodied in Booker, her quest for blackness requires a means of transportation, and that is, memory.²⁷⁶ Bride's inauthentic self in the all-white clothes, changes into embracing her own authentic identity as a black woman in a ritual of taking off the white T-shirt in order to extinguish the fire and rescue Queen.²⁷⁷

According to Bouacida's thesis on *Trauma and Memory Paradox in Toni Morrison's God Help the Child*, Bride's character can be described in relation to dimensions. He considers her a one-dimensional character at the beginning of the novel as she is a successful attractive woman, after sacrificing her body to protect Rain she becomes a two-dimensional character, a woman of beautiful body and a good soul.²⁷⁸ In order to become a three-dimensional woman, she has to reunite with Booker, which is the final phase of her quest that takes place in the house of Booker's aunt.²⁷⁹ To Queen Olive, Bride is hungry of Black culture saying, "I know hungry when I see it" (Morrison, 2015, p. 44) By saying that Queen empowers Bride with the African culture and hopes to remind her of her origin and ancestors.

She questions herself after Booker leaves her with the words that she is not the woman he wants. When thinking about her past as an adult finally appreciating herself she asks: „How about that, Lula Ann? Did you ever believe you would grow up to be this hot, or this successful?", Maybe *she* was the woman he wanted." (Morrison, 2015, p. 11) As described in the Harvard Crimson online: „The Bride at the end of the novel is a far more sincere and honest person than the Bride of the beginning, having completed an immense but believable metamorphosis.“

²⁷⁵ BOUACIDA, Soumaya. Childhood is "not a story to pass on": Trauma and Memory Paradox in Toni Morrison's God Help the Child. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures* [online]. 2021, **13**(3), 409 [cit. 2023-04-05].
Dostupné z: https://www.academia.edu/71562699/Childhood_is_not_a_story_to_pass_on_Trauma_and_Memory_Paradox_in_Toni_Morrison's_God_Help_the_Child

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 408

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 410-411

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 409

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 410

Rain's trauma

Rain, or 'Raisin', is a white girl thrown out on the streets by her mother who forces her to work as a prostitute from a very young age. She is thrown out of their house for biting one man, a customer, and therefore, her mother has to give him back the money he paid. Her trauma is so deep that she cannot talk about it coherently, she keeps running away to another topic because it is too painful for her as depicted in the following excerpt.:

“Some guy. A regular. One of the ones she [Rain's mother] let do it to me. Oh, look. Blueberries!” Rain was searching through roadside bushes. “Wait a minute,” Bride said. “Do what to you?”, “He stuck his pee thing in my mouth and I bit it. So she apologized to him, gave back his twenty-dollar bill and made me stand outside.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 101)

Such behaviour and hatred create a criminal mentality in the child's mind thereby losing her good opinion and hopes for family and society in general.²⁸⁰ Her mother considered Rain only a source of money and that is why she resented her after messing up her business. When Bride asks Rain about what she would do, if she saw her mother again, Rain's criminal mentality and deep trauma are shown.:

“If you saw your mother again what would you say to her:” Rain grinned. “Nothing. I'd chop her head off.”, “Oh Rain. You don't mean that.”, “Yes, I do. I used to think about it a lot. How it would look—her eyes, her mouth, the blood shooting out of her neck. Made me feel good just thinking about it.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 102)

The name Raisin refers to the American Dream that, in Langston Hughes's words, dries up “like a raisin in the sun”. However, she is renamed by Evelyn and Steve in order to rebirth her soul through strong familial relations, love, and spirituality.²⁸¹

Rain's recovery has not probably started yet because her adoptive parents found her as a child and say she still is a child, at least she looks like one – “Her baby teeth were gone when we

²⁸⁰ MASHAQI, Sahar Abdelkarim Asad a Kifah Ali Al OMARI. A Postcolonial Approach to the Problem of Subalternity in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* [online]. 2012, January 5, 2018, **7**(1), 181 [cit. 2023-03-31]. Dostupné z: doi:aiac.ijalel.v.7n.1p.177

²⁸¹ BOUACIDA, Soumaya. Childhood is “not a story to pass on”: Trauma and Memory Paradox in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures* [online]. 2021, **13**(3), 410 [cit. 2023-04-05]. Dostupné z: https://www.academia.edu/71562699/Childhood_is_not_a_story_to_pass_on_Trauma_and_Memory_Paradox_in_Toni_Morrison's_God_Help_the_Child

took her. And so far she has never had a period and her chest is flat as a skateboard.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 97) It is difficult for her to be healed by herself only, at least she was relieved to be able to talk about her trauma with someone, someone she trusted, Bride. Nevertheless, her trauma is so deep that she has a long journey to go in order to fully recover from it.

Booker’s trauma

Booker’s trauma roots in his brother’s murder and in the way his family deals with the loss. Booker is unable to forget his brother, Adam, especially when he had to identify the remains of his body along with his father, which was a difficult task for them due to the brutality of the murder.²⁸² The family wants to mourn a little but then continue in their lives, whereas Booker feels guilty for Adam and every helpless child in the world. He becomes obsessed with the case and thus is eager to find out more about the murderer, see that he is punished fairly, he also tries to be an advocate for helpless innocent children to help solve the problem of child abuse.²⁸³ During his studies he comes across several books, for instance Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* in which the character and fate of Pip reminds him of his brother being also alone, abandoned, and swallowed by waves of casual evil.²⁸⁴

Adam’s death affected Booker’s personality.²⁸⁵ His mentality became similar to Rain’s in the aspect that they both experienced a deep trauma that made them angry and therefore they wanted to get rid of that feeling physically. And so, Booker does not hold back when he witnesses violence against children, and he is not afraid to strike the abusers and thus stand up for the abused children.

He loved his brother very much and after his death cannot build a genuine relationship with a woman. In order to recover, Bride needs to confess her lies and to reconcile with her blackness, thus she has to revisit her childhood memory which serves as a healing power for

²⁸² MASHAQL, Sahar Abdelkarim Asad a Kifah Ali Al OMARI. A Postcolonial Approach to the Problem of Subalternity in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* [online]. 2012, January 5, 2018, **7**(1), 181 [cit. 2023-03-31]. Dostupné z: doi:aiac.ijalel.v.7n.1p.177

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 179

²⁸⁴ MORRISON, Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Vintage International, 2016, p.135. ISBN 9781101971949.

²⁸⁵ MASHAQL, Sahar Abdelkarim Asad a Kifah Ali Al OMARI. A Postcolonial Approach to the Problem of Subalternity in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* [online]. 2012, January 5, 2018, **7**(1), 181 [cit. 2023-03-31]. Dostupné z: doi:aiac.ijalel.v.7n.1p.177

her self-inflicted pains.²⁸⁶ For Booker, on the other hand, memory functions as a disconnecter from his real life because memory excessively generates emotions that are rather disabling.

Booker takes three different measures in order to liberate himself and recover from the shackles of his past. First, he writes a letter to Adam in which he apologizes for enslaving and entrapping his soul, second, he throws away the trumpet which locked him in the sadness and mourning, and third, he plans to start a new life with Bride that would fulfil the emotional gap inside him.²⁸⁷

Love, motherhood, and family

Bride did not feel her mother's love during her childhood and therefore does not know how it feels to be loved by someone. As a successful grown woman, she enjoys male attention and affection, however, the only man she truly loves and cares for is always Booker. The problem in their relationship is a traumatic experience they both have that prevents them from being open and affectionate with each other and makes them afraid of being vulnerable. Booker explains his inner thoughts in the following excerpt:

“Queen’s right, he thought. Except for Adam, I don’t know anything about love. Adam had no faults, was innocent, pure, easy to love. Had he lived, grown up to have flaws, human failings like deception, foolishness and ignorance, would he be so easy to adore or be even worthy of adoration? What kind of love is it that requires an angel and only an angel for its commitment? Following that line of thought, Booker continued to chastise himself. Bride probably knows more about love than I do. At least she’s willing to figure out, do something, risk something and take its measure. I risk nothing. I sit on a throne and identify signs of imperfection in others. ... The first major disagreement we had, and I was gone. My only judge being Adam who, as Queen said, is probably weary of being my burden and my cross.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 160-161)

As Booker finally understands, they have to risk something and focus on their feelings rather than on the imperfections that the other person has for nobody would ever be perfect. Queen

²⁸⁶ BOUACIDA, Soumaya. Childhood is “not a story to pass on”: Trauma and Memory Paradox in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures* [online]. 2021, 13(3), 403 [cit. 2023-04-05]. Dostupné z:

https://www.academia.edu/71562699/Childhood_is_not_a_story_to_pass_on_Trauma_and_Memory_Paradox_in_Toni_Morrison's_God_Help_the_Child

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 406

embodies Bride and Booker's awareness and understanding, forcing them to confront each other to allow themselves to love and be loved. Morrison uses the same motif in Paul D and Sethe's relationship, in *Beloved*, where they both have to overcome their past memories in order to enjoy the present moment and learn to love themselves and each other.

Towards the novel's end, Bride discovers that she is pregnant with Booker's child, which symbolizes a new life and also means hope for society to change. It further hints at Morrison's hope for a better future for American society where women will no longer be oppressed but rather determined.²⁸⁸

Motherhood and maternal love are phenomena that have already been described before in this thesis. In relation to *God Help the Child*, this theme plays a significant role because the absence of maternal love is the cause of Bride's trauma. Sweetness, Bride's mother, rejects to breastfeed her daughter because she cannot stand how dark her skin is and how big her lips are, and she cannot make herself touch her.

„I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch. I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated—bed without supper, lock me in my room—but her creaming at me was the worst.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 31)

Sweetness's behaviour can be compared to the acting of Mr. Yacobowski in *The Bluest Eye* who also tries to avoid touching the little black girl, Pecola as she can tell by his face. The lack of touch and therefore the unfulfillment of her physical needs as a child made Bride to lie about Sofia Huxley being a child molester. She was just eight years old when she pointed her finger at this innocent woman with the hope that her mother would praise and touch her.

„She looked shocked, unbelieving. But my finger still pointed, pointed so long the lady prosecutor had to touch my hand and say, “Thank you, Lula,” to get me to put my arm down. I glanced at Sweetness; she was smiling like I've never seen her smile before—with mouth and eyes. And that wasn't all. Outside the courtroom all the mothers smiled at me, and two actually touched and hugged me. Fathers gave me thumbs-up.

²⁸⁸ WANG, Liting. An Analysis of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* from the Perspective of Trauma Theory. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*. Atlantic Press, 2019, **378**, 847.

Best of all was Sweetness. As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand, my hand.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 31)

The child neglect is a crucial theme in Morrison’s first novel as well. The *trying-to-please-the-mother phase* passes once Bride is sixteen, while in case of Pecola it never ends, and she is dependent and relies on her mother when she goes crazy and suffers from schizophrenia.²⁸⁹ Morrison uses features of magical realism in both of these novels for they underscore the suffering that the mothers unleash upon their daughters, the only people who look up to them in complete surrender as man looks up to God.²⁹⁰

Rain’s mother is another example of a completely detached mother, who regardless of being white cares only about herself and is more interested in her own business than the health and happiness of her daughter, she is only a source of money to her.²⁹¹ This aloof behaviour also leaves Rain deeply traumatized and desperate.

The mother-child bond can only be rebuilt through desire of touching.²⁹² One of the ways is bathing – bath, in Morrison’s novels, symbolizes the touch that connects people together, strengthens their feelings for one another, and transfers emotions. In *Beloved*, Sethe is bathed first by Baby Suggs when she flees Sweet Home, she bathes her in sections so that she makes her daughter-in-law love her body that slaveholders took advantage of. Second time, Paul D bathes Sethe showing her that he finally understands her action of infanticide and appreciates her scarred body.²⁹³ However, in *God Help the Child*, Booker and Bride are those offering the bath to their Black mother, Queen Olive.

On her deathbed, Queen is delirious, mistaking Bride for her own daughter Hannah. She lost Hannah after she claimed to be fondled by Queen’s boyfriend, but her mother refused to

²⁸⁹ MUKHERJEE, Dr. Kusumita. Politics of Selfhood and Magic Realism in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*. *The Criterion Journal: An International Journal in English* [online]. 2017, June 2017, **8**(3), 501 [cit. 2023-04-05]. ISSN 0976-8165. Dostupné z: https://www.academia.edu/33808502/POLITICS_OF_SELF_HOOD_and_MAGIC_REALISM_IN_MORRISONS_THE_BLUUEST_EYE_and_GOD_HELP_THE_CHILD_pdf

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 503

²⁹¹ MASHAQL, Sahar Abdelkarim Asad a Kifah Ali Al OMARI. A Postcolonial Approach to the Problem of Subalternity in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* [online]. 2012, January 5, 2018, **7**(1), 181 [cit. 2023-03-31]. Dostupné z: doi:aiac.ijalel.v.7n.1p.177

²⁹² YAN, MA. a Liu LI-HUI. Making of the body: Childhood trauma in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*. *Academicjournals: Journal of Languages and Culture* [online]. c2017, March, 2017, **8**(3), 21 [cit. 2023-03-31]. ISSN 2141-6540. Dostupné z: doi:10.5897/JLC2016.0416

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

believe her. Booker describes it as an ice between them that never melted, it is still on their minds which suggests that the bond between them never broke.²⁹⁴

Sofie Huxley spent 15 years in prison even though she was an innocent woman, however, she met a friend Julie in prison, convicted of the same crime, child abuse. She smothered her disabled daughter Molly whose photo she hung above her bed, she talked to her, narrated stories that calmed even Sofia down before sleep. Julia's bond with Molly is unbreakable, even though she has expressed her love and care in the worst possible way, but Molly is happier in the end. Morrison used the same motif in *Beloved* as well, where Sethe attempts to kill her children in order to protect them from life in slavery.

The role of family background of the characters is essential to their psychosocial development. Parents should teach their children about the culture they come from and what values to honour. However, they often unknowingly transfer the trauma of being black to their children, as in case of Bride.²⁹⁵ Sweetness tends to be overprotective and thinks that by treating her badly like the world is likely to treat her because she is very dark black, it would set her up for a racist world. Bride finally finds home for the very first time by an old black lady who, as she later finds out, is Booker's aunt, Mrs. Queen.

The absence of a child's mother can never be replaced or compensated for by anything else. Children are deeply affected by this, and such an absence of love always leaves wounds and emotional gaps in them that they try to fill throughout their lives. As depicted in Bride and Rain's relationship, Rain looks up to Bride, feels safe around her and knows she can tell her anything, in fact Bride replaces her with the mother figure that Rain never knew or had.²⁹⁶ Rain refers to Bride as 'my black lady' when describing the incident with the boys shooting at them.:

²⁹⁴MORRISON, Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Vintage International, 2016, p.170. ISBN 9781101971949.

²⁹⁵ YAN, MA. a Liu LI-HUI. Making of the body: Childhood trauma in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Academicjournals: Journal of Languages and Culture* [online]. c2017, March, 2017, **8**(3), 20 [cit. 2023-03-31]. ISSN 2141-6540. Dostupné z: doi:10.5897/JLC2016.0416

²⁹⁶ BOUACIDA, Soumaya. Childhood is "not a story to pass on": Trauma and Memory Paradox in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures* [online]. 2021, **13**(3), 409 [cit. 2023-04-05]. Dostupné z: https://www.academia.edu/71562699/Childhood_is_not_a_story_to_pass_on_Trauma_and_Memory_Paradox_in_Toni_Morrison's_God_Help_the_Child

„My black lady saw him and threw her arm in front of my face. The birdshot messed up her hand and arm. We fell, both of us, her on top of me. ... My black lady made a hurt face but she didn't cry. My heart was beating fast because nobody had done that before. I mean Steve and Evelyn took me in and all but nobody put their own self in danger to save me. Save my life. But that's what my black lady did without even thinking about it.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 105-106)

Maternal instincts in the bride's behaviour indicate that after all she has been through, she is capable of feeling love and care for someone. Similar female bond can be seen in case of Baby Suggs who treats Sethe like her own daughter and tries to give her the love and understanding she did not have a chance to get from her own mother. However, even female friendships can be filled with jealousy and hatred, as in the case of Brooklyn and Bride's relationship. Bride trusts her and thinks they are true friends; nevertheless, Brooklyn shows the racist mentality of a true colonizer for her sarcastic tone indicates that she envies Bride for being successful and coloured.²⁹⁷ She mocks Bride while she is absent from work because she cannot stand a black person having a joyful life and wants to take over Bride's success.²⁹⁸ She makes fun of Bride's appearance and her race.:

„A quarter of her face is fine; the rest is cratered. Ugly black stitches, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead, lips so Ubangi she can't pronounce the r in raw, which is what her skin looks like—all pink and blue-black. Worse than anything is her nose—nostrils wide as an orangutan's under gauze the size of half a bagel. Her beautiful unbruised eye seems to cower, bloodshot, practically dead.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 26)

The African traditions and magical realism

God Help the Child reflects several African traditions as all Morrison's novels. Bride possesses features typical of an African shape-shifter, i.e., a human who can change into an animal and

²⁹⁷ MASHAQI, Sahar Abdelkarim Asad a Kifah Ali Al OMARI. A Postcolonial Approach to the Problem of Subalternity in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* [online]. 2012, January 5, 2018, **7**(1), 179 [cit. 2023-03-31]. Dostupné z: doi:aiac.ijalel.v.7n.1p.177

²⁹⁸ BOUACIDA, Soumaya. Childhood is “not a story to pass on”: Trauma and Memory Paradox in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures* [online]. 2021, **13**(3), 407 [cit. 2023-04-05]. Dostupné z: https://www.academia.edu/71562699/Childhood_is_not_a_story_to_pass_on_Trauma_and_Memory_Paradox_in_Toni_Morrisons_God_Help_the_Child

back or change into another person through magic.²⁹⁹ The aim of this ability is healing or self-healing, as in Bride's case, whose body transforms into her earlier version and only after processing her guilt about the false testimony she feels relieved of her sin and a healing sleep brings her mature body back.³⁰⁰ Bride's magical transformation leads her to „question the reality of her blackness, to subvert both of the white gaze and the self-reflexive gaze of her black community, and finally to re-connect with her black origins.” (Bouacida, 2021, p. 409)

Booker's behaviour also recalls an African religious pattern, as his life is determined by his dead brother's presence. Adam's spirit can be compared to the pattern of a vengeful child, a spirit eager for revenge or answers. Unlike, *Beloved's* ghost of Sethe's daughter, Adam's spirit is rather entrapped in Booker's memory and does not long for answers or explanations but for freedom.³⁰¹ He bids farewell to his brother's ghost in a moving letter he writes at the end of the novel.

The third character who can be related to African religious patterns is Queen Olive, as an African ancestor figure usually helping and giving advice to the living descendants. As the object of ancestor worship, she helps the couple maintain their sense of belonging after their drifting lives.³⁰² These African patterns reduce the complexity of the novel's plot and make important turning points seem to happen automatically.³⁰³

Queen instructs her nephew not to forget about his own painful past, but primarily invest his memory into something worthy that may give justice to all black people who died out of segregation.³⁰⁴ However, he becomes obsessed with his brother's memory and so she advises him to forget about past and start a new life. Queen, on the other hand, fails to apply this

²⁹⁹ KOVÁCS, Ágnes Zsófia. "Black is Beautiful": Black Atlantic Experience and The Black Female Body in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015). In: RÉKA, Cristian, Dragon ZOLTÁN a András LÉNÁRT. *Transnational Americas: Home(s), Borders, and Transgressions*. Szeged: Americana Ebooks, 2019, p. 5.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 6

³⁰⁴ BOUACIDA, Soumaya. Childhood is "not a story to pass on": Trauma and Memory Paradox in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures* [online]. 2021, **13**(3), 410 [cit. 2023-04-05].
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advice to her own life for she laments the loss of her daughter Hannah and cannot forget her.³⁰⁵

The name of Booker's aunt, "Queen" allegorically refers to Africa considered the queen of culture and traditions. „Like Africa, she was colonized by many husbands from different natures.” (Bouacida, 2021, p. 410) Just like Baby Suggs, Queen Olive has a role of the spiritual preacher of her black community giving advice to her people. When watching Booker with Bride she thinks about her youth.

„Youth being the excuse for that fortune-cookie love—until it wasn't, until it became pure adult stupidity. I was pretty once, she thought, real pretty, and I believed it was enough. Well, actually it was until it wasn't, until I had to be a real person, meaning and thinking one. Smart enough to know heavyweight was a condition not a disease; smart enough now to read the minds of selfish people right away. But the smarts came too late for her children.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 158)

She also did not have the chance to raise her children like Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, who did not know where her children were or how they were even before her death.

„Each of her “husbands” snatched a child or two from her, claimed them or absconded with them. Some spirited them away to their home countries; another had his mistress capture two; all but one of her husbands—the sweet Johnny Loveday—had good reasons to pretend love; American citizenship, U.S. passport, financial help, nursing care or a temporary home. She had no opportunity to raise a single child beyond the age of twelve.” (Morrison, 2015, p. 159)

Compared to previous Morrison's novels music plays an important role in her last novel too. Music voices the pain and trauma of African enslaved people who used to sing in order to create a kind of solace after the harsh treatment they had to endure.³⁰⁶ It serves as an escape from their reality, for Booker playing the trumpet means escaping from the terrible memory of his brother's murder. In *Beloved*, readers can also notice the men on the chain gang singing to support each other and most importantly to survive.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 406

The symbolism of earrings

The earrings are mentioned twice in the novel and play a different role on different occasions. The first case involves Sweetness giving Bride earrings as a reward for lying about Sofia's case in court, but she loses them the moment she leaves Sofia's house, where she wanted to apologize to her and make up for the years lost in prison, but he is beaten and thrown out instead. In this case the earrings can symbolize the lies and Bride's guilt. The second mention of earrings is rather related to the African culture as Bride is given golden earrings by Queen Olive. They symbolize the weapon of the mother figure in African American community and after wearing them, Bride empowers herself with the culture and ultimately becomes the three-dimensional woman. She also becomes the culture bearer, similar to the MacTeer sisters who are hoped to become the next generation of African American spiritual healers and bearers of the culture.

THE CONCEPT OF "OTHERNESS" IN MORRISON'S WORKS

In 2017, Toni Morrison published a non-fiction book, *The Origin of Others*, about the most important themes of her novels, how she understands them, including her own experience and, above all, an explanation of the concept of "Other", which recurs in all her works, meaning something unknown and therefore dangerous and scary. Morrison believes that since no one is born a racist and there is no fetal predisposition to sexism, one learns Othering not by lecture or instruction, but by example.³⁰⁷

According to Morrison, the origin of racism lies in the nature of the human species and its behaviour; she describes humans as an advanced species which tend to separate and judge those not in our clan as the enemy, as the vulnerable and the deficient needing control and points out the fact that such tendency has a long history not limited to the animal world or prehistoric man. She portrays race as a constant arbiter of difference, as well as wealth, class, and gender each of which is about power and the necessity of control.³⁰⁸ She explores the concept of race further and defines it as the classification of a species, and says: „...we are the human race, period. Then what is this other thing—the hostility, the social racism, the

³⁰⁷ MORRISON, Toni. *Romancing Slavery*. In: MORRISON, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Third printing. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017, s. 6. ISBN 978-0-674-97645-0.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3

Othering? What is the nature of Othering's comfort, its allure, its power (social, psychological, or economical)? Is it the thrill of belonging—which implies being part of something bigger than one's solo self, and therefore stronger?". (Morrison, 2017, p. 15) In her opinion, it is the social/psychological need for a "stranger", an Other in order to define the estranged self.³⁰⁹

Morrison emphasises the feelings of her characters, their emotions and provides the readers with the character's psychology; in the novels selected for analysis in this thesis, the main focus is on how racism and race affect the lives of the novels' main characters as well as their inner experience. As she wrote in *The Origin of Others*, *The Bluest Eye* was her initial exploration of the harm of racial self-loathing, and later she examined the concept of its opposite, racial superiority in *Paradise*.³¹⁰

The centrality of race in the works of black writers is natural; Morrison was asked during an interview, why she does not write about whites, but she considered this question highly inappropriate, and did not want to privilege whites over blacks. It would not come to people's minds to ask white writers when they plan on writing about black people as well. She said it felt like the lives of black people did not have a purpose and sense without the white gaze, which she found unbelievable.

Morrison dealt with the concept of race and the origin of racism in more of her non-fiction books, in one of them, called *Mouth Full of Blood* (2019), she refers to the change in the attitude of society to black people who more frequently end up homeless and commit crimes out of the desperate need for food and money to live a dignified life. Competitiveness and resentment always arise as a result of unequal rights and possibilities in life. Most black people struggled with recovering their dignity after years of slavery.

She introduces a new definition of the term "public" as a protected reserve open only to law-abiding and the employed, or rather to those who appear to be. She thought about how the restriction of public places for whites affected the lives of black people even more than their memory of past events including slavery and dehumanization. As Morrison further explains "homelessness has been recharacterized as 'streetlessness'. Not the poor deprived of homes,

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 15-16

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 14

but the homed being deprived of their streets.”³¹¹ She draws attention to the fact that such a restriction actually took away black people's place to live, because their lives were happening mainly on the streets. She considers the role of the press and politics in relation to racism and writes:

„It is clear to anyone interested that when the term “public” has been appropriated as space regulated for one portion of society only, when the “poor” have no political party to represent their interests, then the concept of public service—which is your business, the business of a “free” press—gets altered as well. And has been. The public interest of minorities, farmers, labor, women, and so on have, in frequently routine political language, become “special interests.” “We, the people” have become “They, the people.” (Morrison, 2019, p. 34)

Even nowadays, black people have to face racial discrimination of any kind quite often more than other non-native American citizens, even though these people come from a different country, have their own cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and way of living as well as blacks. Morrison thinks about the reason why blacks are singled out, why for example Hispanic people also competing for jobs and housing are considered local, general citizens while blacks are not.³¹²

She further develops this idea and explains the phenomenon of racial bias and argues that racial bias is not absolute, inevitable, or immutable. It has a beginning, a life, a history in scholarship, and it can have an end.³¹³ She claims that the popularization and nationalization of racism have its root not mainly in the press but rather in theatre performances and entertainment. The plays were purely constructed by white people but portrayed the life of black people whom the whites knew nothing about. Therefore, the white actors constructed such plays with the purpose of entertaining not only the audience but themselves as well; they felt to be allowed to speak and act illegally and express rebellion in any sense, sexual or against the government and law, for they painted their faces black, except the lips. This act started in the 1830s when white actors wanted to enjoy themselves and felt more comfortable and relaxed as black people. This marked the beginning of a racist art form called ‘blackface’,

³¹¹ MORRISON, Toni. A Race in Mind, The Press in Deed. In: MORRISON, Toni. *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations*. London: Vintage Publishing, 2019, s. 34. ISBN 9781529110883.

³¹² Ibid., p. 35

³¹³ Ibid., p. 37

connected not just with presentation of songs, dance, or performance styles of black people but mainly of negative stereotypes, such as laziness and foolishness.

The outreach of these productions was far greater than that of print, for they brought the advantage of all people seeing them, even illiterate people, those belonging to lower classes of society or living far from cities. Morrison labelled such behaviour of white actors as “masking and unmasking social problems” for hiding the truth about black humanity, views, intelligence, and most importantly the true causes of social conflict by transferring that conflict to a black population.³¹⁴

Through the male characters from *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove and his mentor Blue Jack, Morrison outlines the idea that maybe an alternative view of God is needed, one reflecting the image in the mirror that would yield the self-acceptance to assist all African people.³¹⁵ The mental trauma and self-destructive perception on the psyche present in her novels was explicated by Frances Cress Welsing:

„To be Black and accept consciously or unconsciously the image of God as a white man is the highest possible form of self-negation and lack of self-respect under the specific conditions of white domination. Such perception, emotional response, and thought are therefore insane. This logic circuit ensures that Black people always will look up to white people and, therefore, down on themselves.” (Welsing, 1991, p. 172)

³¹⁴ Ibid., p. 38

³¹⁵ ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. I's Got the Blues: Malochia, Magic, and the Descent into Madness in *The Bluest Eye*. In: ZAUDITU-SELASSIE, Kokahvah. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University Press of Florida, c2009, p. 41. ISBN 978-0-8130-3328-0.

CONCLUSION

My diploma thesis aimed at introducing the African American literary tradition, and primarily focused on three selected novels written by Toni Morrison.

The theoretical chapters offered a presentation of the history of African American literature and considered the impact of Harlem Renaissance on it. It provided an overview of the female perspective of African American literature and of Toni Morrison's life and her writing style. The last chapter of the theoretical part dealt with the central themes of Morrison's novels including race and racism, gender, migration and slavery, and the reflection of African culture in literature.

The interpretative part of this thesis elaborated on the themes of race and gender which are its main subject, moreover the motifs of motherhood, trauma, African traditional heritage, and magic were discussed as well. The first analysis focused on *The Bluest Eye*, apart from racial and gender issues, the role of family in the process of a child's coming of age and the symbolism of 'the bluest eye' were explained. The second book selected for analysis was *Beloved*, in this chapter the features of the genre of a slave narrative were covered along with the novel's key motifs among which I included trauma, slavery, and injustice. *God Help the Child* is the last novel I chose to analyse for it resembles the previous novels in many ways as described in the chapter on the analysis of the themes and symbols in *God Help the Child*.

The last chapter of my thesis presented the concept of 'otherness', which is related to race and racism, as well as the reason for people's conservative approach to this topic.

In conclusion, my diploma thesis shows that in particular works of the same author, one can always find the author's imprint, whether in terms of the topics covered or the style of writing. In her works, Morrison very cleverly points out past and present problems in society, whether it is racism, slavery or different treatment of people based on their gender. The main idea that Morrison conveys in her novels is that what you do to children matters and shows how it can affect them in the future which is the main theme of her first as well as last novel.

RESUMÉ

Cílem mé diplomové práce bylo představit afroamerickou literární tradici, a především analyzovat téma rasy a genderu ve třech vybraných dílech afroamerické autorky Toni Morrisonové. K této analýze jsem si vybrala *Ty nejmodřejší oči* (*The Bluest Eye*), *Milovaná* (*Beloved*) a *God Help the Child*.

V první části práce jsem se zaměřila na popsání afroamerické literatury od počátků, po současné autory. Zabývala jsem se vlivem období Harlemské renesance na rozvoj literatury, jelikož toto kulturní hnutí připravilo půdu pro boj za občanská práva Afroameričanů a přispělo k masové migraci lidí z jižní do severní části USA během dvacátých let 20. století. Dále byla nastíněn ženský pohled na literaturu, který již ukazuje, jak je psaní ženských autorek ovlivněno tím, jakým způsobem se v historii zacházelo se ženami oproti mužům. Zdůrazněn je především pojem dvojího útlaku afroamerických žen, které nebyly utlačovány či ponižovány jen bělošskou společností, ale často i svými manžely.

Následující kapitola je věnována životu Morrisonové, konkrétně jejímu dětství a dospívání, které významně ovlivnilo její tvorbu. Její rodiče totiž oba pocházeli z jihu a její předci zažili otroctví, což je velmi poznamenalo a na základě afrických tradic své příběhy vyprávěli svým potomkům i dalším generacím.

Obsahem další kapitoly bylo shrnutí čtyř ústředních témat ve vybraných dílech Morrisonové, konkrétně téma rasy a rasismu, genderu s důrazem na mateřství, migrace a otroctví, a také rysů africké kultury, které se prolínají napříč jednotlivými příběhy. Tato témata jsem hlouběji rozpracovala v rámci jednotlivých kapitol týkajících se konkrétních autorčiných románů.

Jádrem mé diplomové práce byla tedy analýza třech vybraných děl, u kterých jsem se zaměřila mimo rasových a genderových problémů i na motiv mateřství, traumatu, a to především dětského traumatu, a v neposlední řadě jsem se snažila vystihnout spojení prvků magického realismu a africké kultury, které autorka ve svých dílech využívá. Ve svém prvním románu *Ty nejmodřejší oči* (1970), který byl zároveň prvním analyzovaným románem této práce, se autorka zabývá problémem rasy a rasistické společnosti a jeho vlivem na mladou černošskou dívku, která si na základě postojů lidí kolem ní vytváří obraz sebe samotné. Vnímá, že se k bílým dětem lidé chovají lépe, a proto se začne modlit pro modré oči, protože doufá, že jí zajistí lepší život a lásku druhých lidí k ní. Autorka tímto dílem ukazuje, jaký dopad má rasismus na

příslušníky utlačované menšiny a také upozorňuje na to, co se může stát, pokud se situace ve společnosti nezmění.

Druhý román vybraný k analýze byl autorčin nejúspěšnější román *Milovaná* (1987), který byl oceněn Pulitzerovou cenou. Příběh této knihy vypráví o matce, která se pokusila své děti zabít, než aby byly uvrženy do otroctví a zažívaly to, čím si ona na vlastní kůži prošla. Jedná se tedy o žánr vyprávění otroků s prvky magického realismu, jelikož se za zmíněnou matkou vrací duch zavražděné dcery a touží po odpovědi na otázku, proč ji matka zabila. Kapitola na téma analýzy tohoto románu se proto snažila vystihnout a popsat prvky jak otrockého vyprávění, tak magického realismu a pracovala také s procesem vyrovnávání se s traumatem, odlidštění a nespravedlností. Významným symbolem toho románu byly stromy, a proto vysvětlení jejich symboliky bylo taktéž součástí této kapitoly.

Poslední román, který byl předmětem zkoumání této diplomové práce je *God Help the Child*, autorčin poslední dokončený román, vydaný v roce 2015. Vybrala jsem si ho z toho důvodu, že v něm autorka opět otevřela téma rasy v souvislosti s krásou a vnímáním sebe sama. Hlavní hrdinka posledního románu má ale už dostatek síly na to se vzepřít stereotypům společnosti, a i přes své náročné dětství si dokáže vážit svého původu a využívá barvu své pleti ve svůj prospěch. V této kapitole jsem se zabývala především problémem dětského zneužívání a zanedbávání, pohledem jednotlivých postav na tuto problematiku, a také popsala symboliku náušnic, která je v románu poměrně významná.

Poslední kapitola této práce byla zaměřena na vysvětlení pojmu jinakosti v díle Morrisonové, jelikož se toto téma pojí s problémem rasismu. Součástí této kapitoly je také vysvětlení toho, kde se strach, obavy a konzervativní přístup k jinakosti berou v souvislosti s historickými událostmi zakořeněnými ve vnímání lidí ve společnosti.

Na závěr své diplomové práce bych chtěla poukázat na to, že v jednotlivých dílech téhož autora lze vždy nalézt autorský otisk, ať už z hlediska probíraných témat nebo stylu psaní. Morrisonová ve svých dílech velmi chytře poukazuje na minulé i současné problémy společnosti, ať už jde o rasismus, otroctví nebo rozdílné zacházení s lidmi na základě jejich pohlaví. Hlavní myšlenkou, kterou Morrisonová ve svých románech sděluje, je, že na tom, jak se k dětem chováme, záleží, a ukazuje, jaký dopad to může mít na jejich pozdější vývoj a život, což je hlavní téma, kterým otevřela a zároveň uzavřela svou literární tvorbu.

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