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**THE FEMINITY ASPECT IN TONI
MORRISON'S WORKS**

Bachelor theses

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Anglický jazyk a literatura se zaměřením na vzdělávání a Český jazyk a literatura se zaměřením na vzdělávání, kombinované studium

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Podpis

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Abstract

New wave of female Afro-American authors in the 1960's brought new point of view to the literature. They created a strong Black female protagonist who struggles to find the place in the world ruled by white men. One of the authors was Toni Morrison. Her trilogy consisting of *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* is the theme of this bachelor thesis. Female protagonist of the stories are described and compared to one another in order to find the main features which make them special.

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Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the world most recognizable female authors of the last century. The first Afro-American writer to receive the Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer Prize and many other awards. Her most recognizable work is to be novel *Beloved*, but also her other works have high quality status. Being Afro-American herself, this fact mirrors in her books. Main topics are struggle of black people for their identity, feminism, epic themes of life and its purpose, she is well-known for detailed depiction of her characters.

The aim of the bachelor thesis “The femininity aspect in Toni Morrison’s works” is to compare and contrast three main female characters of Morrison’s novels *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*. These three books are together considered to be Dantesque trilogy about African American people. The first part deals with slavery and mother-daughter relationship and love, the second is from 1920s Jazz age, dealing with man-woman relationship, love, infidelity and longing for a child. The last book is set in 1970s and the main plot centres voluntary segregation of black people, resistance, faith, love for God, hate.

There will be short biography of the author and her meaning to literature in the first chapter. Each of the following chapters will focus on one of the books and description of female protagonists. In the last chapter there will be comparison of all the protagonists, their differences and similarities.

1 Toni Morrison

“...you see, my juices come from a certain place. I am like a painter who is preoccupied with painting violins, and may never do moods or paint a tree...”

Toni Morrison¹

Toni Morrison, born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, in Lorain, Ohio, is a contemporary African American novelist who was awarded both Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize among many others awards. Her most evaluated novels are *The Bluest Eyes*, *Song of Solomon* and especially *Beloved* for which Morrison was awarded Nobel Prize in 1993. Morrison the first Afro American woman who received this award.

Morrison graduated in Howard University in 1953 with her major subject being English, later attended Cornell University and received master’s degree in English. After her studies she taught at Texas Southern University and Howard University, where she met her husband. After their divorce in 1964 she started working on her first story about a little Black girl, which later became her novel *The Bluest Eye*, first being published in 1970. Morrison continued to teaching at universities but also worked as an editor in Random House in New York.

After the success of her first novel other releases followed – *Sula* in 1973, *Song of Solomon* in 1977, *Tar Baby* in 1981. Morrison received many awards for these works, e. g. the National Book Critics Circle Award or the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award. Her most recognizable novel *Beloved* was published in 1987. This one was rewarded both with the Pulitzer and the Nobel Prize in 1993. The Nobel Prize committee describes her to be the author “who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.”²

After receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature Morrison has published *Paradise* in 1998, though the novel was already in progress in 1993. Morrison has already published four new novels in the new millennium – *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and her latest work *God Help the Child* was released in April 2015.

¹ Eds Taylor-Guthrie, D.: *Conversation with Toni Morrison*, p. 60, online Google Books <https://books.google.nl/books?id=iYvE9-i_g9AC&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs#v=onepage&q&f=false> Cit. 11. 4. 2015

² Beaulieu, Elizabeth, A.: *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, p. 10, online <https://archive.org/stream/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia_djvu.txt> Cit. 11. 4. 2015

However, Toni Morrison wrote not just novels but also several essays and critics, also children's literature (together with her son Slade Morrison who died of cancer), two plays and a libretto *Margaret Garner*. Garner was real historical persona, an African-American slave, whose fate was an inspiration for Morrison's novel *Beloved*.

Morrison is not just an extraordinary and successful writer. For her work she was awarded more than 20 awards, not just literature awards. In 2012 Morrison received Presidential Medal of Freedom from the US President Barack Obama. This award is given "for especially meritorious contribution to (1) the security or national interests of the United States, or (2) world peace, or (3) cultural or other significant public or private endeavors".³ Another significant award given not exactly for her literature work is The National Humanities Medal, given "for work that has deepened the nation's understanding of the humanities, broadened our citizens' engagement with the humanities, or helped preserve and expand Americans' access to important resources in the humanities."⁴ As the nature of these awards shows Morrison is celebrated for the choice of her topics and for her struggle for Afro-American people. She is also often associated with feminism because predominantly women are protagonists of her novels. But the author does neither consider herself to be a feminist nor refuse her work to be classified as feminist. Morrison is also known for supporting the US President Barack Obama in his first presidential elections in 2008 when he won over Hillary Clinton.

Toni Morrison can be described as a celebrity in a real sense of the word meaning – she is often publically seen in TV or public discussion, presents her political opinions as it is an artist's right to do so and points out towards the social and racial problems in modern society in her novels which belong to the top literature produced nowadays.

1.2 Other Afro-American female writers

Although Toni Morrison has a rather specific position among Afro-American female writers she is not the only significant figure. Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Ellease Southerland (EbeleOseye) or Toni Cade Bambara belong to the same generation of African American female writers as Toni Morrison does. All of them are recognizable as professors, social activist or were rewarded with notable awards not just for their

³ Online http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Presidential_Medal_of_Freedom_recipients Cit. 11. 4. 2015

⁴ Online http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Humanities_Medal Cit. 11. 4 2015

literature work but also for their fight for social right or race and gender equality. They brought new strong Black female characters in their novels. These characters are more vivid, active, real than ever and what more, they make us forget all the stereotypical female characters who were described in earlier books not just by white authors but by Black authors as well. With these strong characters comes as well new interpretation of the reality based on experience of their creators, the female authors. Reader is offered a new unusual point of view through women's perspective – new relationships, new social or intimate problems. Topics like racism, sexism and feminism occur more often and women deal with these problems in a new way. As Coser states “Black women writers pose important challenges for readers and criticism general.”⁵ Another confirmation of a special and unique way Black writers can provide is suggested in The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia “Black women writers have always, out of necessity, had to maneuver outside of the dominant white (including the white woman's) literary system. Their exclusion from the mainstream literary traditions led them to develop and employ alternative means of communicating, drawing upon their own experiences of oppression and resistance to shape their texts and to represent the characters and situations within it.”⁶

⁵ Coser, Stelamaris: *Bridging the Americas: the literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and Gail Jones*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1995, p. 1

⁶ Beaulieu, Elizabeth, A.: *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, p. 13, online <https://archive.org/stream/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia_djvu.txt> Cit. 11. 4. 2015

2 Beloved

The most awarded Toni Morrison's book is her fifth novel *Beloved*, which was awarded both Pulitzer and Nobel Prize. Based on the story of a slave named Margaret Garner who killed her own child in order to prevent the child from the very same life in slavery, the story is about dealing with the killing and the death of a child who returns after years as a ghost and later a real foreign girl who seems to be the incarnation of the deceased baby. The name Garner is present in the novel as well as an intertextual feature – the last owners of Sethe are named Garners.

The story sets in 1870's, era after the Civil War where black slaves already had their freedom but their lives were still difficult. Main protagonist is Sethe who escaped from slavery years ago with her children but killed one of them later in order to save her from a slavery life. Sethe lived with her mother-in-law Baby Suggs and memories of both of the women are being told retrospectively during the whole story. The narrative of the story is mostly er-form but some chapters are told in ich-form from Sethe's, her daughters' or Baby Suggs' and other characters points of view, mainly when they describe their memories from the slavery days in the Sweet Home. Because the novel deals with a slavery theme, the book is often associated with neo-slave narrative. Story combines features from the real history and folklore as well as imaginative and even mystical ones.

In 1998 the movie of the same name was directed by Jonathan Demme starring Oprah Winfrey as Sethe, Thandie Newton as Beloved and Danny Glover as Paul D. The movie was positively received by the critics and nominated for several movie awards including Academy Award nomination in The Best Costume Design category. Both Danny Glover and Kimberly Elise (portraying Denver) were actually awarded for their supporting roles.

2.1 Plot

Main protagonist of the story is Sethe, a former slave who now lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, with her daughter Denver and mother-in-law Baby Suggs in house number 124. When Baby Suggs dies, two sons of Sethe leave the house and never came back home and are no longer part of the story. Sethe is isolated and has no friends in the town. Years ago when she came to the town she killed her baby daughter to prevent her from

the traumatic experience of the life in slavery which Sethe and her family have undergone and this very experience has left great damage on Sethe. Therefore the house 124 is said to be haunted by a ghost of the deceased girl as a punishment for Sethe's doing.

An old friend from the Sweet Home Paul D comes to visit Sethe. Paul D was friend of Sethe and her husband Halle and they planned the escape together. Through the flashback memories of Baby, Sethe and Paul D the reader gets the whole story. Sethe never knew her mother, who was also slave. In her early teen age Sethe comes to Sweet Home where she server as a replacement for old Baby Suggs whose son Halle bought her the freedom. Halle later becomes Sethe's husband. Sethe is very sad they cannot have a proper wedding, but the marriage is quite happy and they have four children together. All the slaves from the Sweet Home decide to run after their old good master dies and they have a new cruel one. Some of them succeed, pregnant Sethe among them but she is abused and whipped before she can run away and her husband watches the scene which drives him mad. On her run, Sethe gives birth to her fourth child, daughter, named Denver after a white girl Amy Denver who saves her life and takes care of Sethe and her newborn baby.

Sethe manages to get to her mother-in-law house but is tracked down by her owner from whom she has just escaped. In this moment she fears for the safety of her child and kills her to prevent her from being dragged to slavery. She is stopped before killing her other children and goes to jail. When she comes back, she lives with her children and Baby Suggs. When Baby dies, her two sons leave their home when only Sethe, Denver and the ghost of the murdered child remain. In this point, Paul D enters and they altogether live as a family for the time. Lately a girl who seems to be the killed baby girl appears, claiming she has no memory of her previous life but knows some details from Sethe's and Denver's past. Her name is Beloved. She and Sethe immediately develop a loving and quite obsessive relationship with one another, also Denver loves the girl. On the other hand, Paul D hates the girl as well as she hates him but is seduced by her against his best intentions. Paul D eventually leaves the house and Beloved stars to behave in a very manipulative and strange way, she always wants to be with Sethe, wants to eat a lot of sweets and tortures Sethe mentally. Denver seeks help at an old family friend, Lady Jones. Local people help Denver and her family when they learn Sethe is ill. When a man, who is Denver's new employer, comes to house 124, Sethe mistakes him for her former owner and attacks him. Other people stop her before

she can really hurt him and this is the moment when pregnant Beloved is seen for the last time. Since that time, Sethe gets better, Paul D returns to the 124 and Beloved is forgotten.

2.1 Female protagonists

Main character is Sethe, her daughters Denver and Beloved, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs. Some supporting female characters are Mrs. Garner, former owner of Suggs' family, Lady Jones, teacher of Denver, or Amy Denver, white woman who helps Sethe during her delivery.

Sethe arrives to the Sweet Home, farm owned by the Garners, to be a replacement for old Baby Suggs, whose son Halle has earned her freedom. Later she decides to marry Halle but is very sad because they cannot have a proper wedding although she longs for a real wedding dress and a ring. She makes her dress herself for the first night with her husband and she overhears their master nicknamed schoolteacher by his slaves talking about black slaves as animals which she remembers for the rest of her days. She is proud of herself and wants to be self-sufficient but she actually does not refuse help of the others. Sethe loves her children very deeply as shown when they reach their freedom. Although she was sexually assaulted and lost her milk for her unborn child (which situation she recalls many times) before the escape, she considers the freedom to be the most precious gift to her children and because of this belief she tries to kill them when schoolteacher comes for them. Sethe is haunted by the memories of her slave life and does not want to see her kids living the same way. But killing her little daughter causes her another trauma and all these bad memories affect her life in the present. Her sense of guilt does not allow her to see Beloved as her reincarnated daughter for the first time and she tries to explain the dilemma she had to Beloved and justify her own actions. She is manipulated by Beloved because she still fears her past and tries to make amends to the girl. But at the end of the story she actually lets go the past, probably forgives herself, stops to fear and tries to live in the presence with Denver and Paul D.

Denver is the youngest child and the second daughter of Sethe and Halle. She is very closed, sensitive and introvert but clever. She is eighteen years old but acts younger because of her loneliness and isolation. The only people she meets are her mother, grandmother and brothers, later only mother and the ghost present in the house.

She actually fears a bit to go out on her own and cannot picture the outside world. Denver views the other people as a threat to her little world, e. g. Paul D who is grown fond by Sethe. She almost blindly loves her sister Beloved but when she sees that the relationship between Sethe and Beloved escalates, Denver steps up and courageously asks for help their neighbours and even gets a job for herself. She also was the one who communicated most with the ghost and was attracted to the paranormal but she is the one who actually expelled the ghost with the help of the others. This character goes a long way from being a scared girl to a grown up and confident woman.

Beloved is believed to be the daughter of Sethe, the girl who was killed as a baby but returns as a reincarnation in flesh and blood eighteen years later. She is actually the centre of the whole story and the main part of the moral dilemma presented. Beloved is emotionally unstable, demanding, wants Sethe just for herself. When she appears it is suggested that she has escaped from a captivity of an unknown white man. She remembers nothing from her past only water and a bridge when she appears at the door in 124. When Beloved asks Sethe about her earrings and knows the song Sethe used to sing to her children, everybody starts to believe she is the reincarnation of the deceased girl. Her mental condition does not correspond to a grown up woman in her early twenties but rather to a child. She refused to understand that Sethe killed the baby because she did not want her to live as a slave and that act should have granted her freedom. Beloved sort of encourages the guilt and the fear of the past in Sethe and refuses to forgive her mother her sin. At one point in the story the roles change and Beloved acts as a mother to Sethe, who never had the chance to get to know her mother. Beloved is an allegorical character that might represent not just the killed baby, but also the dark side of the slavery, the past and itself. Her character is also the one that drives the story forward – she changes both Denver and Sethe (although she drags her through her personal hell at first, Sethe gets better at the end of the book) as well as Paul D, and this change also effects the whole neighbourhood when Suggs family makes new friends. Last scene where Beloved is present is a parallel to a scene in the past – a man comes to 124, Sethe tries to free her child and kills her. In the present, Denver's new employer comes to 124 to visit Denver but Sethe attacks him in order to protect Beloved. The people, who came to save Sethe from her poisonous relationship with Beloved when Denver asks them for help, stop Sethe and Beloved disappears. This may suggested that the girl finally understands the sacrifice her mother made or that the fear

and guilt Sethe carries within her cannot last in the confrontation with real life, friends and support from both the family and community.

Last the main female character is Baby Suggs, mother of Halle and mother-in-law of Sethe and grandmother to Howard, Buglar, Beloved and Denver. She was sexually abused during her days in slavery and had eight children but was allowed to keep only Halle. Halle wants to save his old mother so he works extra on Sundays and earns the freedom for Baby. With help of abolitionists she moves to Cincinnati, house 124. She becomes preacher and has many friends. As Baby Suggs witnesses the infanticide of her grandchild she reaches her breaking point and stays in the house for the rest of her days. Baby dies after being free from slavery for ten years but without her children. Although Baby lives sixty years as a slave she was able to keep her spirit and some optimism but in the end she was also broken by her life experiences, mainly losing her grandchild.

Some other supportive female characters present in the story are only briefly mentioned.

Mrs. Garner is the wife of Mr. Garner and sister of the schoolteacher who inherits the Sweet Home after Mr. Garner's death. The Garners granted their slaves some privileges and were considered being kind to their slaves but nevertheless they *own* slaves. When Sethe steals cloth to make herself a wedding dress, Mrs. Garner does not punish her and gives her earrings as a wedding gift. Later she speaks with her brother about Sethe being abused by his nephew.

Lady Jones is the former teacher of Denver. When Denver realises she needs to act in order to save her family, she goes to Lady Jones and asks her for advice, help with finding a job. Lady Jones is portrayed as a motherly figure and a good person.

Amy Denver is a young white girl who helps Sethe with her childbirth. Although she helps her, she only stays for some moments because she is afraid of being seen with a black slave who has just escaped. Amy travels to Boston and is no more mentioned but Sethe names the baby Denver after the white girl.

Ella was also a slave but now she operates the Underground Railroad station and helped Sethe to get her to Baby Suggs. She was sexually abused by her masters, but remains strong but she does not believe in love anymore. Ella is deeply touched by Sethe's act of killing and the following return of the dead child. She is one of the people who come to rescue Sethe from being manipulated and used by Beloved.

Patsy nicknamed Thirty-Mile Woman is lover of slave Sixo from the Sweet Home. When slaves escape from Sweet Home, she joins them. Although Sixo is captured and killed, pregnant Patsy escapes and Sixo dies happy knowing she and the baby are safe. Patsy is described as a beautiful and extraordinary woman.

3 Jazz

The sixth novel of Morrison *Jazz* was published in 1992. The story sets in Harlem, New York during “Roaring Twenties” or “the Jazz Age”. The name of the book mirrors the jazz music itself concerning the composition which seems to be free and inconsistent. Also the narrator of the story is hard to identify because there seems to be more than one person to tell the story. These kind of narrators are refer to as an unreliable or untrustworthy narrator. Opposite to an “all-knowing” narrator, untrustworthy narrators change or modify the reality according to their point of view and can add subjective elements and feelings.

The story is about unhappy fate of Violet and Joe Trace’s marriage. Readers learn the whole story retrospectively with many flashbacks to the youth of the protagonists in Virginia, the first information to be read is that there was a funeral of a young girl whose body was violated by another woman. Later it is revealed that the dead girl was Dorcas, young lover of Joe Trace, and his wife Violet was the one who desecrated her body. Violet is said to be strange and crazy women who loved only her birds she had home in a cage. As mentioned earlier, the story has “a feeling of jazz music” and can be read also as a chronicle of Black people during so called Harlem Renaissance. There is also another intertextual meaning hidden – the character of Dorcas is based on a real Harlem woman who was shot to death. Photographer James Van Der Zee published in his *The Harlem Book of the Dead* a photography of a dead woman resting in peace after she bled to death from a gunshot wound. The woman’s identity was kept unknown so Morrison decided to create a story using this one character as a source of inspiration.⁷

3.1 Plot

Violet and Joe trace are unhappily married and living in Harlem when Joe falls in love with eighteen years old Dorcas Manfred. They meet when Joe is selling cosmetics to Alice Manfred, Dorcas’s aunt. After some time Dorcas feels tired of Joe so she wants to end up their relationship and tells him she is sick of him. Dorcas is drawn to a young

⁷ Beaulieu, Elizabeth, A.: *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, p. 182, online <https://archive.org/stream/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia_djvu.txt> Cit. 11. 5. 2015

popular man whom she dances at a party with. Joe comes to the party looking for her and he shoots her to her shoulder. Dorcas tell everyone not to call an emergency and later she bleeds to death because of this untreated wound.

Violet shows up at the Dorcas funeral and scares her face which causes big disarray. Violet is jealous at the girl even after her death and this pushes her to go to visit the girl's aunt, Alice Manfred. They actually become friends as they share feeling about the tragic incident. After some time, Joe and Violet are seen to trying to renew their marriage with a little help from Felice, Dorcas's friend.

As a parallel to a story going on in Harlem, readers follow the history of Violet and Joe, their family background and how they met. Both Violet and Joe families have complicated history, e. g. Violet's mother Rose Dear committed suicide leaving Violet feeling like an orphan or Joe's mother Wild is said to be crazy homeless woman.

3.2 Female protagonists

Violet Trace is the main character. She is wife of Joe Trace and she is currently unhappy with that position. They live together but next to each other and Violet longs for a child. Because they have none she is keeping birds in a cage including a parrot who says to her "I love you". But after the funeral of Dorcas she let all the birds go. This is one of her deeds she is considered being crazy for. Most people believe that she is crazy not just because of the birds. Violet tried to steal a child once but later was unable to explain why. She also sat in the middle of the road and was unable to leave – Violet later states that it felt like watching someone else. Some of her neighbours even said they expected her to attend Dorcas's funeral and scar her face. She is said to have cracks, these moments when she simply get mad. After the funeral accident people start to call her Violent. And Violet gets into one of her cracks and starts to ask everyone about the dead girl as if she wanted to find out everything about her like some secret she is yet to discover. But she was not always "violent" and odd. She is described as being a nice and energetic person when she was young. After she married Joe she wanted escape the place where her mother killed herself so they moved to the City (Harlem is referred as the City by both partners) on her suggestion. After the traumatic experience on the Dorcas's funeral when she becomes friend with Alice Manfred and Felice, she realises that she has to stand up again for making things better as she did when she was young and left Virginia. When talking to Alice, she confronts her own past and fears

and the fact she did not want a child when she was young. She also realises that she sees Dorcas as someone from her past. At the end of the story we can again see that she is starting to recovery from the drama controlling her anger and frustration and disappointment with her past and wants to reconnect with her husband Joe.

Dorcas is the third part of an unhappy love triangle Violet-Joe-Dorcas, described to have a light skin straight hair and being neither pretty nor ugly. She is a young beautiful girl, an orphan living with her aunt Alice Manfred. Her parents died quite a tragic death when she was a little child – her father was killed in a streetcar and her mother died in a burning house during riots the very same day. Since that day Dorcas has lived with her aunt. Alice is older sister of Dorcas mother and is very protective of Dorcas, even overprotected. As a teenager, Dorcas feels trapped in that overprotective environment and wants to discover the world on her own and being seen as a real woman. She realizes that when she meets Joe. When she starts meeting him in a rented apartment, she does not think about consequences of dating a married man who is old enough to be her father. Joe brings her little gifts on each of their meeting and she is very happy at first. But she gets bored and refuses to see him anymore claiming she is sick of him. She finds herself a new young boy named Acton who is supposed to be a real man who will make her a real woman. When Joe shoots her at a party she chooses to die being watched by people around and in this way she sort of remains with Joe by embracing the fate he chose for her. As was mentioned earlier her character was based on a real unknown woman shot to death from Harlem.

Alice Manfred is other important female character. She is a widow and a guardian of her young niece Dorcas. She perceives the outside world as full of danger temptations for young people and that all of them are sinful and can be a threat for her niece. Therefore Alice keeps being very overprotective of her protégé. When Violet visits her after Dorcas's death, she is scared at first. She considers both Joe and Violet dangerous although she does not fear them really. In spite of all expectations both old women sort of understand each other as they spend time together and become friends. What more they allow each other to heal their physical scars, in Alice's case her relationship with her own sexuality.

Felice is last of the important female characters. She is Dorcas' best friend. Felice lives with her grandmother because her parents live and work elsewhere. She knows about Dorcas's affair with Joe and she covers for her even though she does not approve of her behaviour. She appears to be more mature than Dorcas of their friends.

At the end of the book she helps Violet and Joe reconnect and because of her absent parents is seen by the couple as their own. Felice has a high moral standards and self-confidence therefore being maybe the strongest of them all.

There are also other female characters in the book. Almost all of them are parts of the background story from the history or the young years of the protagonists.

Malvonne Edwards – Neighbour of Violet and Joe. She rents her apartment to Joe so he has a place for his meetings with the young lover.

Rose Dear – Mother of Violet and daughter of True Belle who committed suicide. When her husband left her and their children in debts she loses her strength to fight and escapes from live.

True Belle – Violet's grandmother who accompanies Vera LoiuiseGray when she leave Virginia. But when she learns that her daughter killed herself she comes back home and raises Violet and her siblings. True Belle is very optimistic and positive person who laughs often. She can be seen as a counterpart to Felice, they both are strong characters who help people around them to start over. True Belle also unconsciously causes trauma to Violet because she is envy that her own grandmother was a family to a stranger, to a son of Vera Gray, her mistress but not to her own grandchild.

Vera Louise Gray – Daughter of plantation owners who has a child with a black man and therefore she is send away by her family. True Belle leaves her family to go with Vera.

Wild – Black woman who lives in the woods. Although it is never explicitly said readers can assume that she is Joe Trace's mother. Her origin is uncertain and her name was given to her when she bites a man who helped her during delivering her child, probably Joe.

4 Paradise

Paradise is the seventh novel of Toni Morrison and the last part of the trilogy. The book was published in 1998, the first novel after Morrison was awarded with the Nobel Prize. The original title of the book was supposed to be *War* but was later changed to Paradise by Morrison's editor. Morrison states:

"I wanted to open with somebody's finger on the trigger, to close when it was pulled, and to have the whole novel exist in that moment of the decision to kill or not."⁸

The story is set in 1970's in a small all-black town called Ruby. The name was chosen because of a black woman Ruby Best Morgan, a sister of the town's most prominent men, who was the first (and the only one so far) person to die and to be buried in a new city.

The book is divided into nice chapters, each named after the significant woman who the story is about (Ruby, Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Consolata, Lone, Save-Maria). Story is not told from their point of view but the narrator's er-form point of view but feelings and thoughts of the protagonists are presented as being their own. Therefore the narrator of the story is presented as the all-knowing. Yet again the story is not told continuously in time. The tale of every of the protagonist is introduced separately but all stories are connected at the point when women meet at the Convent. The flashbacks of town's history are mentioned in every chapter alongside the actual present story and constitute a parallel between the two periods of time. Throughout the flashbacks we can learn the whole of the Ruby town, why it was founded and later named after Ruby.

Although the main topic of the book is mostly referred being the love for God there is also another important subject. The author emphasized also relationship between the patriarchal community in Ruby and the matriarchal and "spirit free" female community in the Convent. For the men of Ruby is also their pure black race very important and both the race and gender factors are essential in the relationship of both present parties. Therefore the main theme should be referred also love for one another and acceptance of the others even with their differences.

⁸Mulrine, Anna: This side of 'Paradise': Toni Morrison defends herself from criticism of her new novel *Paradise*, online
<<http://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/pschmid1/eng152a/eng152a.1999/morrison.html>> 18. 6. 2015

4.1 Plot

Main plot focuses on the death of five (actually just one as revealed later) women in a place called the Convent nearby Ruby, in Oklahoma. Readers learn at the very first sentence that the first girl who was killed was a white one but the others were black. The identity of the white girl is not revealed in the story nor do we have some other information who she was or she get in the Convent. As mentioned earlier, the story is told through the nine different female characters. Each chapter contains the life story of the protagonists, a flashback scene and a present scene from Ruby or the Convent.

Ruby was found by nine families who left town Haven and wanted to found a next city just for them. Those people remember the horrible journey, when they were refused help from both white Americans and another black Americans who were lighter-skinned. For the Ruby men, skin colour is one the main reason they hate others, especially the women in the Convent. The Convent was not a convent at all but it belonged to some embezzler and there were paintings and other objects with sexual content. Later the Convent was Christ the King School for Native girls but was shut down due to lack of money. Mother Mary with one of the girls, Consolata, stayed there and Connie is a leader of the Convent when the nearby town is established. Consolata has a love affair with one of the most prominent man's town Deacon Morgan and this short episode is one of the crucial events in a relationship between the Convent and Ruby. Later other girls come to the Convent, the first is Mavis, later Gigi, Seneca and Pallas. Men in town are afraid of these women, because they are very unconventional, behaving very freely and controversially, also on their own without any male supervisor.

The woman actually heal from their undergone traumas under the Connie's guidance and are free of their demons. Meanwhile, nine men of Ruby are looking for someone to blame of the changes in their town and society and they blame the Convent women. They came to the Convent and shoot them all, as later revealed actually just two of them to death. Deacon Morgan is also there and realises that they did what the other people did to his own ancestors – they were not able to accept anyone because of their race, gender and other differences.

4.2 Female protagonists

Because the story contains a lot of female characters the main focus will be on the Convent women and the most important women of the town. Not all the women who have their own chapter in the book will be mentioned.

Consolata Sosa (Connie) is the leader of the Convent. She was found in the streets by Mother Mary Agnes who brought her to the Convent school and both women stayed there when the school was shut down. Connie has an affair with Deacon Morgan, married man and father of two children. His wife Soane knows about that and comes to the Convent to ask for the abortion which Connie refuses. Soane loses the baby on her way home and the episode creates a friendship between those two women. Both of them standing on the other sides yet representing a connection – Connie being independent, light-skinned and green-eyed and Soane being a good all-black wife, mother of two boys, obedient to her husband. She also saves life to one of the Soane's sons and therefore becomes his "mother" in a transcendent meaning. After the death of Mother Mary, Connie loses her will to live and stays in the dark cellar drinking wine while other girls take care of her, mostly Mavis. It is said that Consolata has a special gift of light, inner sight or healing and that is why she stays in the dark. She is feared because of her green eyes which allow her to "see". In the end she decides to help her girls to heal from their traumas, they cut their hairs and draw their pictures, talk about the traumas which cleanse all the women of their nightmares and horrors. Connie is shot in the head by the hand of Steward Morgan, brother of Deacon who tries to stop him but fails. Consolata is described as motherly figure who lost the will to live after the death of her mentor but finds it again when she feels she has to help her friends and protégés in the Convent.

Mavis Albright is the first woman to come to the Convent and the only one who knew Mother Mary who died shortly after her arrival. Mavis is haunted by her abusive husband and her sin – she left her newborn twins in the car in a hot day and they died. Mavis wants to escape her family because she thinks both her husband and her daughter Sally and the other boys want to kill her for what she has done. There is a hint of Mavis suffering some mental illness like paranoia because she tells her mother of her suspicion they want to kill her. Later in the Convent she hears her twins' laughter and Connie is the only one who agrees with her. She also has aggressive sexual dreams of a strange foreign man. This can be also another sign of her illness but probably it is just a sign of

undergone trauma of her abusive husband and the loss of her children. Being second oldest and a mother of five children Mavis acts also like a mother to other girls in the Convent, she takes care of them and Connie who lies in the dark cellar and even cooks for them which she did not do for her family so often. She leaves the place several times to see her children or her mother and learns that she is wanted for a robbery of the car from her husband. But Mavis always comes back to the Convent and as the others she recovers from her trauma. At the end of the book she meets with her daughter Sally.

One of the younger inhabitants of the Convent is Grace Gibson called Gigi. She went looking for a rock resembling sexual act of lovers because she is supposed to meet her boyfriend there. But she ends up in Ruby and her appearance provokes all the serious men most. She stays in the Convent and has a long-lasting sexual affair with one of the town boys. This ends when he beats her and Gigi is finding another sexual object in Seneca, her young roommate in the Convent. Grace was abandoned by her mother and later took part in a riot and sees young Black boy being killed which is her nightmare. Also her boyfriend was imprisoned. After the accident in the Convent she visits her father and then it is implied that she stayed together with Seneca. Gigi is very liberal, free-spirited, controversial, wearing too short skirts and temperament young woman. She often fights with too conservative Mavis, one times they have a real fist fight. Both women dislike each other from the day one they met when Gigi was sitting naked in the kitchen taking care of Connie after Mother Mary died. Mavis was visiting her own mother by that time. And Gigi keeps provoking both Mavis and the men from Ruby by lack of clothes and her open attitude towards the boys.

Seneca is described as childlike sweet girl who is trying to get money to bail her boyfriend from prison. Because of that she serves as a sex slave for a very rich and lonely woman and gets paid five hundred dollars. Seneca was also abandoned by her mother (but she believed it was her sister) when she was five years old and she lived in foster care. She was abused by her foster brother and when she told her foster mother she was removed to another family. Because of this experience she tries to please everyone and tries to make peace between Mavis and Gigi, choosing this to be her goal. After the shooting in the Convent she is seen with Gigi and she even briefly meet the woman who claims to be her mother. Seneca is very gentle and introvert soul suffering from the lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem. Her boyfriend who is she trying to bail out also often yelled at her telling her she is worthless and even his mother encourages her to leave him. Seneca often cut herself with preciousness thinking of her

cuts being an art. She is also starting to heal from her nightmares with the help of her friends and she stays in the Convent.

Last of the Convent women is Pallas Divine Truelove. She is only sixteen and when she comes to Ruby she is with child. Pallas comes from a wealthy family and she escaped from her father to visit her mother who is an artist. Her name is Divine and Gigi nicknames Pallas after her mother. While staying with her mother Pallas sees Divine and her boyfriend make love and leaves mother's house but she has a car accident. One of Ruby woman Billie Delia Cato finds her in the hospital and takes her to the Convent. She leaves the place to see her father but returns home and gives birth to a baby boy. It is indicated that Pallas is the white girl from the first sentence of the book but this assumption is never confirmed. After the accident in the Convent Pallas is confirmed dead but she is later seen with her baby and other women in the car. Pallas is very reserved when she comes to the Convent haunted by the image of betrayal from both her mother and lover and also suffers from shock she underwent after her car accident when she was chased by two men and hid herself in the water and felt something touching her legs. Pallas did not want to speak in her first days with girls. She later opens to Connie and tells her tale to the oldest woman.

The other women who play significant role in the book are Patricia Cato and her daughter Billie Delia Cato. Patricia is interested in town's history and the whole history of the founding families is explained in her chapter. Billie Delia is her young daughter, one of the few inhabitants who does not despise the Convent women. She actually helps them time to time. Billie has a reputation of a promiscuity girl and in the eyes of the men is comparable to the Convent women. After the shooting when all the bodies of the women are missing Billie Delia believes that all of them are alive and will come have their revenge on the Ruby men who hurt them. Is questionable if the women really do survive or if the final chapter is just a dream or Billie's wish or imagination. The last of important women in the story is Lone DuPres, an old lady who taught Connie to control her power of healing. Lone also overhears the men of Ruby planning their ambush of the Convent. She persuades her friend to warn the girls there but they come too late.

The Convent itself is also a personification of femininity and its power. It symbolises the safe haven and the place where they can forget about from their traumas and heal both physically and emotionally.

5 Comparison

In the following part of the theses there will be a comparison of the main female characters who were introduced in the previous chapters. It is obvious that Morrison chooses female as a centre of her works and pictures them without any warts and all. All her characters are found in the life changing situation. All of them have undergone many difficulties and continue to struggle to find their own place and purpose in the world.

The analysis in the previous chapters was based mostly on the reading experience but the following chapter tries to see the problem in a more complex way but based on the reading experience as well. Usually, the characters in the novels can be divided in the two basic categories – flat and round characters.⁹ Flat characters can be often described just by one main attribute and they do not change much throughout the story. The advantage of the flat character is that readers do not need to follow their development and therefore can be easily recognized and remembered.¹⁰ Also the situation and scenes they appear in are more or less similar and their actions are predictable. They create a certain type of a character which appears in many stories; e. g. type can be a wise old man, beautiful young lady, conservative old lady. As can be seen from the description of the flat character, they do not appear much in Morrison's novels. They can be seen mainly as supporting characters but even these are often suggested not to be strictly “black and white” and therefore not strictly flat.

The second category consists of the round (plastic) characters. As the term itself suggests the characters are more complex, variable, develop their personality and opinions, can be tested, and can surprised with their actions and decisions.¹¹ These characters are rarely recognisable as only good or bad, mostly suffer from some dilemma, and might have trust issues, relationship issues or some trauma from the past. Because Morrison's characters are Afro-American women in the difficult situations, most of them were sexually abused, mocked by their families and friends, undergone the loss of a child or do not know their own families. Protagonists often act against some general morals, often viewed as rigid and bounding for their open mind. In most cases, these protagonists need to endure some catharsis to accept the reality, the situation they find themselves in.

⁹ Forster, E., M.: *Aspekty románu*, Tatran, Bratislava, 1971, p. 69

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 70

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 76

Morrison can picture the female characters in a very realistic way, with the very real problems which can be related to anyone. The fact that the author took her inspiration from real events (story of enslaved Margaret Garner, Jane Doe murdered in Harlem) supports this statement.

Following part of the thesis will examine some features that are common for all three novels and their protagonists.

Mother-daughter relationship

Mother and motherhood itself play both very significant, maybe even central role in Morrison's novels. *Beloved* is based directly on this kind of relationship and love of a mother to her children but it also other two novels are dealing with the topic. In *Jazz* three generations of women are mentioned as well as in *Beloved* (True Belle – Rose Dear – Violet; Baby Suggs – Sethe – Denver/Beloved). The same pattern can be recognized in the *Paradise* as well, although the women are not connected by blood rather by their fate of outlaws.

In all three stories mother-daughter relationships are mostly problematic, often violated and damaged – Sethe kills her daughter to spare her from slavery, Violet was abandoned by her mother and she herself cannot have a child, which is her greatest desire and obsession. Several characters in *Paradise* have bad relationships with their mothers, for example young Seneca who was abandoned by her mother or Pallas Divine whose mother seduce lover of her daughter.

On the other hand, when blood relationships do not work, there is always a motherly figure who is acting like a mother and an advisor in need. Mrs. Garner, Amy Denver, Felice, Alice Manfred, Connie, Mavis – all of these protagonists have their moments when they serve as a motherly archetype even though Mavis is a mother of her own children (who she has abandoned). This is also a great demonstration of the certain plasticity of all the Morrison's characters. But *Beloved* stays above all author's work regarding this theme showing motherly love as being capable of anything, an ultimate sacrifice to save the dearest children even if the cost is death. In *Jazz* motherhood is missing or unfulfilled and in *Paradise* cannot be defined by blood relationships but rather by an emotional bond.

Sex and sexuality

Morrison describes sex as a very common matter without any censorship, as a part of everyday life with all its positives and negatives. That statement may seem clear and obvious today but considering the released dates of the books and also the setting of the stories suggest that this kind of description was not really common and sometimes might be even shocking (raping of a little girl in *The Bluest Eye* or pregnant enslaved women being abused in *Beloved*). As explained in The Encyclopedia “Black authors have always carried the burden of representing the race. Black writers were obliged to present African Americans in the best light possible in order to combat racist stereotypes, including the belief that peoples of African descent possessed animal-like, uncontrolled libidos.”¹²

Sexual violence is also often presented; Morrison breaks the taboo for the first time in *The Blues Eye* as mentioned earlier, when a little girl is raped by her father. In *Beloved* Sethe is raped which leads to the loss of her milk for her daughters and traumatised Sethe forever. Her man Halle watches the scene and is driven mad by the fact he could not save his partner. In *Paradise* some characters were also abused but some of them like Gigi show their sexuality openly which provokes the man from Ruby Town. There is also a lesbian relationship suggested between two young girls but is not fully confirmed. Connie is affected by the “stereotype of animal-like sexuality” when her lover thinks of her she is an animal when she bites his lip. *Jazz* does not deal with the sexuality so openly, the lack of intimacy is the reason Joe was driven from Violet to his young lover Dorcas.

In general, sexuality and intimacy is another large theme repeating in Morrison’s works. Sex is not idealised but shown in his raw and true form, mostly connected with some sort of trauma, seldom have the characters healthy sexual life.

Freedom and slavery

Slavery and fight for freedom create together a large part of the history of Afro-American people and it is understandable it mirrors in stories written by Black authors. Yet again, *Beloved* shows the horrors of slavery with all the details without any censure. Women were treated like sex toys, their children were taken from them, men were

¹² Beaulieu, Elizabeth, A.: *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, p. 301, online <https://archive.org/stream/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia_djvu.txt> Cit. 25. 11. 2015

seems just like animals nothing more, they had no control over their lives. Sethe and Baby Suggs are examples of this type of slaves. Although the Garners treat them better than other masters, they are still slaves with a prize and without their own opinions and the name Sweet Home only ironically emphasizes this fact. In *Jazz* we can see True Belle who is freed from slavery but decides to leave her family and stays with her former mistress. Violet cannot understand why her grandmother left the family for a white girl. In *Paradise* slavery is also present as the founders of Ruby are former slaves. But they have also “slaved” mentality when they want to create town of their own and people with other thinking are not allowed to be there as well as women from the Convent who show open mind and desire to be free on their own without conservative and old fashioned rules.

Slavery is seen as something bad and violent which destroys people and their beliefs. Freedom on the other hand is sort of an ultimate goal for most of the characters meaning not just actual freedom from slavery but also state of mind or a place when they can be free, like the Convent. With freedom is closely connected following feature.

Home

Considering the history of Afro-American people in America, home is understandably another central theme. During the slavery era, their home was consider to be South America, but the people themselves were idealising Africa to be their dream land. In Morrison’s stories home is seldom a place where her characters find themselves. The Encyclopedia explains that “Morrison’s characterization of home does not always offer peace and serenity. Indeed, the domestic is not impervious to societal ills, such as racism and sexism. In fact, these forms of violence are frequently replayed in this domestic arena with disastrous consequences. Often, though, it is not geography that signals home, but identity.”¹³

In *Beloved* the place where the slaves live is called ironically Sweet Home. But this Sweet Home is everything but a home to the characters. Sethe was abused there as well as her husband and their friends, some of them were killed while trying to escape. Sethe and her family are finally able to create a real home for themselves after they embrace that they were slaved and used but they are free human being with a right to

¹³ Beaulieu, Elizabeth, A.: *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, p. 159, online <https://archive.org/stream/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia_djvu.txt> Cit. 25. 11. 2015

create their own place called home. Baby Suggs who became leader and preacher becomes safe haven for Sethe and her children and the house 124 is the first real place worthy to be called home. *Jazz* also deals with finding home when Violet and Joe migrate from the South to city where they hope to find freedom and happiness. But they are not happy at all often remembering the South and home they had there, and the city is only place where they live but do not *feel* home.

Paradise has the Convent, safe haven for women who are seeking shelter and understanding without judgement. The Convent is strictly for women who can come and go after recovering from their suffering. It is a place where they can be free and loved and protected. As on opposite to the Convent there is Ruby Town. Also place called home by founding families who live in a strict patriarchal hierarchy which sees the Convent as a threat to their values. Although the Convent women seek no conflict, they are attacked by the town men and the place itself is violated and desecrated. But the Convent represents the little Paradise, place filled with love, also religion and understanding rather than rigid morality. Women in the Convent seek this place to heal themselves and try to start a new life.

As suggested above, all the main characters are trying to find a place to call home which can solve their traumas and heal them but they need to recover first to be able to live a healthy life, like Sethe does, like Violet does and the survivors from the Convent as well.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of the bachelor thesis was to describe and compare female protagonists of Toni Morrison's Dantesque trilogy *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*.

In the first part, Toni Morrison was introduced as a skilful and awarded author who brought strong Afro-American female characters to the literature. Her novels *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* create a trilogy connected by the theme of love, love between mother and children, love between lovers and love among other people, community and the God. Protagonists of the novels are often struggling with their fate, recovering from some undergone trauma in the past, trying to find themselves, their family, home, happiness. Their experiences are described in full details, without censorship but in a sensitive way. The characters are plastic, variable and cannot be judged strictly being good or bad, but they are rather complex human beings with real worries and fears. The last chapter tries to compare protagonists and see the similarities in their fates. *Beloved* and *Paradise* protagonists have much in common; protagonists of *Jazz* are a bit different, sometimes even having opposite problems and opinions as the others.

Toni Morrison is the first woman to ever receive the Nobel Prize for literature which was well deserved, in my opinion. She uses realistic depictions; parallels to show the difference or the similarity in the story, her characters cannot be seen through but develop in the process of storytelling. Her works are full of surprises, twist and often have the feeling of some magic, supernatural, mystery, music which grants them other dimension and open space for interpretation.

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Annotation

Jméno a příjmení:	Veronika Dostalová
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Vedoucí práce:	Mgr. Andrea Hoffmannová, Ph.D.
Rok obhajoby:	2016

Název práce:	Téma feminity v díle Toni Morrison
Název v angličtině:	The feminity aspect in Toni Morrison's works
Anotace práce:	Práce je zaměřena na srovnání ženských postav v díle Toni Morrison. Jako zkoumaný materiál slouží tři romány tvořící volnou trilogii <i>Milovaná</i> , <i>Jazz</i> a <i>Ráj</i> . Nejprve si krátce představíme autorku a její život a dílo, poté samotné romány. Hrdinky románu jsou nejprve popsány samostatně, v poslední kapitole jsou srovnány navzájem a snaží se postihnout jejich nejvýraznější rysy.
Klíčová slova:	Toni Morrison, ženské hrdinky, <i>Milovaná</i> , <i>Jazz</i> , <i>Ráj</i>
Anotace v angličtině:	The thesis focuses on the comparison of female protagonists in free novels of Toni Morrison. The novels are <i>Beloved</i> , <i>Jazz</i> and <i>Paradise</i> ; creating a trilogy connected with the main topic of love and its different forms. The protagonists are describes within their story then compared to one another.
Klíčová slova v angličtině:	Toni Morrison, female protagonists, <i>Beloved</i> , <i>Jazz</i> , <i>Paradise</i>
Přílohy vázané v práci:	Bez příloh
Rozsah práce:	34 stran, 56 485 znaků
Jazyk práce:	AJ

Resumé

Bakalářská diplomová práce se zabývá dílem afroamerické spisovatelky Toni Morrison. Morrison byla první Afroameričanka, která obdržela Nobelovu cenu za literaturu, a patří k nejuznávanějším autorkám dneška. Její tři romány Milovaná, Jazz a Ráj tvoří volnou trilogii spojenou ústředním tématem lásky v různých podobách. Protože Morrison staví do popředí ženské hrdinky, vybrali jsme si tyto za cíle svého zkoumání a porovnávání.