

Racism in Toni Morrison's Novels

Toplak, Bianka

Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2023

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:630164>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-06-26**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[Repository of the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences - FHSSRI Repository](#)



University of Rijeka
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of English Language and Literature

Bianka Toplak

Racism in Toni Morrison's Novels

(B.A. Thesis)

Supervisor:
Dr.sc. Tatjana Vukelić

Rijeka, 2023

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	2
1. About Toni Morrison.....	3
2.1. Historical context for ‘Beloved’	4
2.2. Slavery in ‘Beloved’	7
2.3. The significance of the past in ‘Beloved’	9
3. Historical context for ‘The Bluest Eye’ and ‘Sula’	12
4. Race as a beauty standard in ‘The Bluest Eye’	13
5. Racial issues in ‘Sula’	15
6. Conclusion.....	17

Abstract

Racial discrimination has been a relevant topic for centuries. Throughout history, African Americans were oppressed because of the color of their skin. This was due to beliefs that white people were superior or smarter simply because they were white. This has made it extremely difficult for black people to adapt after the abolition of slavery. Although they were no longer enslaved, they still did not feel free. They still had to fight for equal rights and still had to work much harder to climb the social ladder. Perhaps racial issues seem significantly smaller than hundreds of years ago, however, awareness should still be spread for the future generations.

Due to racism still existing to this day, it comes as no surprise that it was and still is a frequent theme in literature. Although innumerable authors are known for their takes on racial issues, I have specifically chosen to analyze the work of Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison had a great impact in literature, and her work tackles important aspects of racial prejudice and the impact these have on an individual's identity.

Key words: African Americans, oppression, discrimination, identity, prejudice, community

Introduction

The persistent existence of racism serves as a harsh reminder of the barriers that still separate us in a world where diversity should be celebrated and equality practiced. Since the days of slavery, African Americans have had to fight for their equality in the world. Their identity is defined and their fate is sealed solely by the color of their skin. For hundreds of years, black people endured unjustified racial discrimination. The essence of racial discrimination and prejudice lies in the absurdity of the idea that anything as seemingly insignificant as skin color should define somebody. As history has proven many times, such views have encouraged prejudice, exclusion, and even violence against minorities. We may choose to believe that racism does not exist any longer, however, it is still undeniably present even in modern society. This persistence serves as a reminder that eliminating racism requires more than merely enacting new laws. It also requires a general understanding of its absurdity and a proactive dedication to change. Our awareness was once again awoken in 2020, after the George Floyd incident, which led to the Black Lives Matter movement.

One of the most well-known and praised African-American authors, Toni Morrison, wrote frequently about black communities and how they were affected by racism, oppression, and slavery. This thesis examines racism as it is depicted in three of Toni Morrison's well-known novels: "Beloved," "The Bluest Eye," and "Sula." My goal is to carefully analyze the complex ways that racism is represented in these narratives, shedding light on its complexity and its effects on people and communities. This thesis intends to not only unravel the layers of racial prejudice but also to raise consciousness about its lasting presence and insidious repercussions by critically evaluating the themes, characters, and sociocultural situations provided in these works. This thesis aims to build a greater awareness of the structural inequalities and to encourage readers to spread their awareness further.

1. About Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison was a renowned and lauded American author and Nobel winner, who profoundly analyzed the daily struggle of African Americans, leaving a lasting impression on literature. Toni Morrison was born February 18, 1931 as Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, a town located in Ohio. Due to the difficult racial discrimination of that time, as an African-American woman, she was taught that the only people she could rely on were the ones around her in Lorain. According to Claudia Tate (1983), Morrison herself described her town as neither plantation nor ghetto” (p. 119). Morrison has developed a passion for writing and storytelling due to her family's tradition of sharing tales and songs. Therefore, she always had full support from her parents when it came to her goal of being an author.

Morrison finished her bachelor's at Howard University in 1953 and received her master's degree at Cornell University in 1955. After graduating, she spent the next 9 years teaching first at Texas Southern University, and then at Howard University. Afterward, she started working as an editor. However, later in life, she returned to teaching, namely at the State University of New York. She published her first novel ‘‘The Bluest Eye’’ in 1970. In the following years, she published several other successful novels, such as ‘‘Sula’’ (1973), ‘‘Song of Solomon’’ (1977) and ‘‘Tar Baby’’ (1981). However, her by far most praised novel, ‘‘Beloved’’, was published in 1987. After that, she published many more novels, such as ‘‘Jazz’’ and ‘‘Paradise’’. Throughout her career, she wrote eloquently about racial issues, history, and identity. The complicated plots and rich symbolism in her work captivated readers and pushed them to consider the complexities of social and racial prejudices and personal challenges. Her skillful storytelling is nothing short of exceptional, as it frequently intertwined the historical and the spiritual. With her most well-known pieces such as "Beloved," "Song of Solomon," and "The Bluest Eye," she shed light on the darker aspects of American history. Toni Morrison's writing accomplishments have remained constant throughout her long and brilliant career. She was also the first African-American woman to have the honor of acquiring the Nobel Prize for Literature.

2.1. Historical context for “Beloved”

Slavery in today's United States existed before the incident of 1619; however, 1619 marked the beginning of a long period of Anglo-American slavery in the English colonies and later, in North America. When a Dutch slave ship arrived at the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, a system of widespread human exploitation began in England's mainland American colonies. In exchange for food and supplies, the Dutch slavers traded their slaves acquired from Africa to the local settlers.¹ These slaves were then used as labor for white European settlers. Subsequently, the number of African slaves skyrocketed, almost increasing tenfold within 80 years.²

With the introduction of the mechanization of spinning and weaving, an increasing demand for cotton became vital to England's textile industry. Due to the inconvenient process of removing the seeds from raw cotton fibers by hand, the textile industry faced a bottleneck. To counter this issue, African slaves transitioned from the failing tobacco harvest to the cultivation of cotton.³ The cotton industry created an extreme demand for African slaves. By 1860, North America reached approximately 4 million enslaved black people.⁴

The American Civil War began in 1861 due to tensions between the southern and northern states over control of slave and state rights, as well as westward territorial expansion, which would have been utilized by the southern states with slaves.⁵ Central to the conflict was the control of slavery and the economic benefits that came with it. The Southern states of America were heavily dependent on slavery to thrive. After the election of Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president and a known opponent of slavery, the southern states seceded and formed the Confederate States of America. Initially, the war was not fought to abolish slavery,

¹ Ponti, C. (2019, August 14). America's History of Slavery Began Long Before Jamestown. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/news/american-slavery-before-jamestown-1619>

² Shah, A., Adolphe, J. (2019, August 16). 400 years since slavery: a timeline of American history. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/aug/15/400-years-since-slavery-timeline>

³ History.com Editors. (May 11, 2023). Black History Milestones: Timeline. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones>

⁴ Shah, A., Adolphe, J. (2019, August 16). 400 years since slavery: a timeline of American history. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/aug/15/400-years-since-slavery-timeline>

⁵ History.com Editors. (2009, October 15). Civil War. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/american-civil-war-history>

as President Abraham Lincoln understood that he wouldn't gain much support, even among his allies, in 1861 while fighting a war against slavery.⁶

However, to garner support, Abraham Lincoln decided to address the question of slavery in 1863 with the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. This granted enslaved people freedom within the Confederacy and they played a role in helping Abraham Lincoln wage the war against the Confederate States within their own territories. The Confederate States surrendered in 1865 after a war that had cost the lives of millions.

Even though the victory of the northern states of America meant that the enslaved people within Confederate regions achieved freedom, the question of their sovereignty remained. The 13th Amendment, an article added to the US Constitution that abolished slavery, was adopted in 1865. With white people regaining civil leadership in the South, several laws known as Black Codes were enacted to restrict Black people, thereby continuing to exploit them as cheap labor.⁷ In 1868, the 14th Amendment was ratified and added to the U.S Constitution. This meant that every person born in the U.S. or acquiring U.S. citizenship, including former slaves, would receive equal protection under the law.⁸ The 15th Amendment, adopted in 1870, prohibited any institution or government from denying the right of a citizen to vote regardless of race, color, or previous servitude.⁹

A pivotal moment in the civil rights movement occurred on August 28, 1963, when over 250,000 people, both Black and White, took part in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Speaking during the march were a number of civil rights activists who pushed for racial equality, voting rights, and access to jobs. The final speaker, Martin Luther King Jr., gave an impassioned speech highlighting the plight of Black Americans and the necessity of ongoing nonviolent action. In his well-known "I have a dream" speech, he voiced optimism for racial harmony and equality. King's speech, which went above and beyond what was written down,

⁶ History.com Editors. (May 11, 2023). Black History Milestones: Timeline. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones>

⁷ History.com Editors. (May 11, 2023). Black History Milestones: Timeline. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones>

⁸ History.com Editors. (2009, November 9). 14th Amendment. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/fourteenth-amendment>

⁹ History.com Editors. (2009, November 9). 15th Amendment. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/fifteenth-amendment>

ended up being one of the best in American history. It signaled a turning point in the civil rights movement and made King a leading figure.¹⁰

By 1960, the civil rights movement had started to seriously acquire traction in the United States thanks to the nonviolent resistance campaign that Martin Luther King Jr. had been leading since the late 1950s. The Civil Rights Act, the most comprehensive piece of legislation promoting racial equality in American history, was forced through Congress in June 1964 by Lyndon Johnson, who was not previously renowned for his support of civil rights. President Lyndon Johnson signed this legislation into law on July 2, 1964. It ended discrimination in public establishments, mandated the desegregation of schools and other public spaces, and outlawed discriminatory practices in employment. This act marked the most comprehensive civil rights law since the Reconstruction era.¹¹

¹⁰ History.com Editors. (May 11, 2023). Black History Milestones: Timeline. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones>

¹¹ History.com Editors. (May 11, 2023). Black History Milestones: Timeline. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones>

2.2. Slavery in “Beloved”

In Morrison's novel "Beloved", which starts in 1873, we learn about the hardships of the protagonist Sethe, an African-American mother of four, who has suffered greatly while being enslaved at a Kentucky plantation, called Sweet Home. Sweet Home was initially run by Mr. Garner. However, after he passed away, his wife, Mrs. Garner invited Schoolteacher to run the plantation alongside his two nephews. The reader gets to experience the physically and mentally difficult life situations that the characters had to go through, not only at Sweet Home, but also outside of it. We get to understand how big of an impact slavery has had on black people. The protagonist, Sethe, was completely chained by her past and it made her lose any type of identity she had. She was too haunted by her past to be able to live her life to the fullest - even in freedom. It is almost as if she was paralyzed by the trauma from her past. Sethe's past in slavery does not only affect her; it affects the people around her, including her children. After her escape, Sethe decided to kill her children, however, only her first-born daughter actually died. Perhaps Sethe decided to commit such a crime because she was overwhelmed by her trauma and wanted to save her children from the horrors of slavery.

As readers, we get to experience the brutality of slavery which was an unfortunate reality to many African Americans. Through Sethe's character, we get to understand what sorts of abuse many slaves had to go through. During her captivity, Sethe was sexually and physically abused by Schoolteacher's nephews. They also stole her breast milk before she managed to escape Sweet Home. Sethe was never the same after everything that happened to her at Sweet Home, and it became even worse after she found out that Halle, her husband, saw it all before she managed to escape. Furthermore, it is important to note that the way Sethe, Paul D, or Baby Suggs got treated while being enslaved, also twisted their self-perception. After so many traumatic experiences, they started feeling some sort of dislike towards themselves.

“That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children.”¹²

¹²Morrison, T. (1998). Beloved. Random House large print ed. New York, Random House Large Print in association with Alfred A. Knopf. (p. 475)

This was the main challenge for Sethe and Paul D. However, to be able to build a future together, they had to overcome these emotions and accept that the past can not be changed, and neither can the things they have been through.

Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, was also no stranger to slavery and the trauma that followed. Baby Suggs was enslaved for many years, and she gave birth to all of her nine children while being enslaved. However, her children have been taken away from her. She never saw them again, except Halle. Halle was also the reason Baby Suggs was eventually free. He bought her freedom by negotiating and doing more work on the plantations. But Baby Suggs was far from a free woman. Even after Halle bought her freedom, she still could not live a peaceful life. She was still a slave, except now, she was a slave to her trauma and thoughts. This goes to show that, even after escaping slavery, a person can no longer live their life in peace. The memories can not be erased and it is something every former slave had to live with. However, as a form of escape, Baby Suggs decided to become a preacher after her slavery days.

“Who decided that, because slave life had “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue,” she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart—which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it.”

On the other hand, Baby Suggs' son, Halle, remained a kind-hearted and caring man despite the brutalities he had to face at Sweet Home. He tries to provide the people he cares about with happiness and affection. Not only did he manage to buy his mother's freedom by doing extra work himself (and keeping a positive attitude while doing so), but he has also shown that he would do anything to protect the people he cares about.

However, even Halle had his fair share of struggles. Before Sethe's escape, she was sexually assaulted and degraded by Schoolteachers' nephews. Although Sethe was not aware of this, Halle witnessed all of it. The fact that he could not protect his wife shattered him and his identity. No one ever saw Halle again after the escape from Sweet Home, however, Paul D does mention him to Sethe during their argument, when she finds out that Halle did witness her being assaulted, but did not intervene.

2.3. The significance of the past in “Beloved”

Even though Sethe escaped her days of slavery years ago, she was still haunted by the images from the past. Due to Sethe’s character and her behavior throughout the book, we as readers get to understand that escaping slavery is the easier bit. The real escape is the one that follows, which is a psychological journey that all formerly enslaved African Americans had to endure. Overcoming the bad memories from the past is the real challenge, and that is what we get to experience by observing each character in the book.

Despite her efforts to escape her devastating and horrific past, somehow it always came back to haunt her. Sethe was trying to adjust and live a normal life in Cincinnati after her escape, however, she was soon confronted by her past the day that Paul D came waiting at her door when she was returning home. Even though they had not seen each other for eighteen years, they immediately reconnected. However, this must have been a big challenge for Sethe, as Paul D was at Sweet Home with her, and was a direct reminder of everything she had been trying to forget. As the story goes on, we get to learn more and more about Sethe’s character, how she escaped, and the people who helped her along the way.

We can also see that Baby Suggs is haunted by the past. She could not live a happy life even after becoming a free woman. She was still devastated by the fact that she had lost all her children, and eventually, it led to a deep form of depression that she could not overcome.

Paul D is no exception to the practice of locking memories away to preserve inner peace. In the novel, his heart is described as a tin tobacco box. His goal is to not become too emotionally attached to things, and to distance himself from his emotions and feelings. This is believed to be due to the painful situations he has suffered at Sweet Home and the prison camp in Alfred.

“After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing. If he could do those things—with a little work and a little sex thrown in—he asked for no more, for more required him to dwell on Halle’s face or Sixo laughing. To recall trembling in a box built into the ground. Grateful for the daylight spent doing mule work in a quarry because he did not tremble when he had a hammer in his hands.

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.''¹³

In this quote, we can see that Paul D has shut down almost all human emotions he has. He only kept the parts of him that were necessary for him to ‘walk, eat, sleep’. Paul D symbolizes the people who, as a form of defense mechanism, shut down their emotional side to prevent themselves from getting hurt.

Even though he kept suppressing his feelings and locking his past in the back of his brain, this is not a healthy practice and can not be upheld. Therefore, it came as no surprise that Paul D’s ‘tin tobacco box’ had to burst open eventually - and it did. After Beloved compelled him to sexually engage with her, his tin tobacco box broke open. This was a significant moment for Paul D, as that is when his feelings and memories caught up with him again. It was time for Paul D and his memories to come to terms with each other and move on.

*‘His tobacco tin, blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey.’*¹⁴

Although he had his struggles from the past, Paul D wanted to help Sethe accept her past, rather than run away from it. He understood that to be able to move forward with their lives, they had to leave the past where it should be - in the past. He wanted to make sure that they focused on building a future, rather than dwelling on the past, which can not be changed.

*‘‘Sethe,’’ he says, ‘‘me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.’’*¹⁵

Furthermore, the most important symbolism of the past in the novel is the one of Beloved’s character. While Sethe, Paul D and Denver were returning from a carnival, they found a woman in front of 124 who looked sick. They invited her inside, and she introduced herself as Beloved. Beloved is believed to be the embodiment of Sethe’s dead daughter. She is

¹³ Morrison, T. (1998). *Beloved*. Random House large print ed. New York, Random House Large Print in association with Alfred A. Knopf. (p. 80)

¹⁴ Morrison, T. (1998). *Beloved*. Random House large print ed. New York, Random House Large Print in association with Alfred A. Knopf. (p. 415)

¹⁵ Morrison, T. (1998). *Beloved*. Random House large print ed. New York, Random House Large Print in association with Alfred A. Knopf. (p. 521)

the only character who has no recollection of her past and is actively being questioned by Paul D about it. However, that is why I believe that she symbolizes a reminder as to why the past should not be forcefully forgotten or ignored. Once Beloved came around, Sethe seemed to be pushed to share more and more of her past with the rest of the characters.

*‘If Beloved speaks to the inadequacies of memory in its efforts to retrieve a personal and collective past, she speaks even more powerfully, through her mediations, to the risks and dangers of forgetting. To repress memory, "to keep the past at bay," is to divert it into the dark silences and crippling diversions of hysteria.’*¹⁶

Moreover, Beloved’s arrival seems to be a turning point for most characters. Whether it is directly or indirectly, she had a significant impact on the character’s healing process after remembering and accepting their past.

*‘...there is also an element of disruption and unease in the novel, embodied in the character of Beloved. As an eruption of the past and the repressed unconscious, Beloved catalyzes the healing process for the characters and the reader; thus, she is a disruption necessary for healing.’*¹⁷

¹⁶ Moglen, H. (1993). Redeeming History: Toni Morrison’s “Beloved.” *Cultural Critique*, 24, 17–40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354128>

¹⁷ Krumholz, L. (1992). The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. *African American Review*, 26(3), 395–408. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041912>

3. Historical context for ‘The Bluest Eye’ and ‘Sula’

Several novels written by Morrison had their plots set during the time of the Great Depression. The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic crisis that originated in the late 1920s and persisted throughout the 1930s. It was primarily caused due to the big stock market crash called ‘Black Tuesday’. It began to spread worldwide and it caused numerous people to lose their jobs. This made many families lose their homes and savings, causing an immense increase in homelessness. The Great Depression impacted everybody, however, the black community was affected significantly more by this. The unemployment rates were much higher among African Americans than they were among white Americans. Consequently, African Americans were among the first to lose their jobs and the last to be hired. Furthermore, this led to many African Americans losing their homes and having to move to segregated neighborhoods. Furthermore, because getting a job became a significantly bigger challenge, the tension in the black community started rising and the violence and lynching rate increased as well. The economic and social injustices that the black population in the United States experienced grew worse during the Great Depression.¹⁸

The late 19th and early 20th century were also called the Jim Crow era. The Jim Crow laws were primarily active in the Southern area of the United States, and they pushed racial segregation further in public places, such as schools or public transport. The Jim Crow laws denied African Americans the right to vote. Jim Crow laws also encouraged violence and intimidation of black people and communities. Lynchings, racial abuse, threats, and other similar methods were encouraged to uphold white dominance and establish racial hierarchy, which produced an environment filled with fear for black citizens.¹⁹

¹⁸ Pells, R. H. and Romer, . Christina D. (2023, July 3). Great Depression. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/money/topic/Great-Depression>

¹⁹ Urofsky, M. I. (2023, August 4). Jim Crow law. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law>

4. Race as a beauty standard in “The Bluest Eye”

Toni Morrison’s novel “The Bluest Eye” focuses on the life and growing up of a young girl called Pecola Breedlove during the 1940s, right after the Great Depression. Pecola has had a difficult life filled with sadness, violence, and self-loathing. The novel, just like the real world, deems white people to be “superior”, especially when it comes to the world of beauty. Already from a young age, Pecola is surrounded by signs and magazines that make her believe that beauty is defined by having blue eyes and beautiful, blonde hair.

“Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured.”²⁰

The rejections Pecola had to deal with, alongside her own thoughts of self-hatred, led her to lose her innocence, as she faced the cruelty of the real world. As Morrison herself described it, the novel demonstrates how such a villainization of the black race can have a massive impact on just an innocent child. According to Cormier-Hamilton (1994) “Pecola is victimized by a society that conditions her to believe that she is ugly and therefore worthless, because she doesn't epitomize white Western culture's idea of beauty.” Pecola spent her whole childhood dreaming about having the bluest eyes, as this would make her conventionally more attractive, according to modern society. Pecola also compares herself to Maureen, who is of lighter skin than Pecola. Pecola knew that a lot of boys had a crush on Maureen, and she assumed that this was because Maureen had lighter skin than her. In one particular situation, even Pecola’s mother chose the little white girl whose mother she works for. It is important to note that Pecola was led to believe that “whiteness” is superior, more beautiful, and generally speaking the standard of beauty. This ideology is not something a child is born with - it is taught. In “The Bluest Eye”, young children are subjected to an ideology that convinces them they are not worthy of loving or being loved.

As children, we are taught to turn to our parents for support, love, and affection. However, when Pecola turns to her parents, according to Mahaffey (2004), “she only finds an overwhelming source of racial self-hatred. Thus, Pecola's misery over her "blackness," and thus

²⁰ Morrison, T. (1999). *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage. (p. 20)

her ugliness, originates in her family's perception of themselves.” Pecola’s parents had trauma of their own from their past, and therefore, they passed their self-hatred onto their innocent child.

Pecola's tragic end is ultimately brought on by her internalized self-hatred and her not being able to live up to the unrealistic expectations and beauty standards that she is surrounded with. The story highlights the harmful effects of these beauty standards since Pecola's dream of an impossible goal causes her to fail and causes her mental health to deteriorate.

5. Racial issues in “Sula”

The plot of Toni Morrison’s “Sula” is taking place in a fictional town Medallion, Ohio. Above Medallion, there is a neighborhood where specifically the black community resides, as agreed between a farmer and his former slave. Throughout the story, we get to meet several characters, which all encounter struggles of their own. Although racism is not the central point of the novel, it can be spotted and analyzed in many of the situations. Helene Wright is a black woman, who was born in a warehouse in New Orleans, and raised by her grandmother, Cecile. Helene was raised to be a traditional and religious woman. She got married at the age of sixteen to Wiley Wright and settled down in The Bottom. She gave birth to her only child, Nel, and she tried to raise her under the same conditions under which Cecile raised her. Eventually, Helene’s mother, Cecile, gets sick, and Helene makes her way to New Orleans to prepare for the upcoming funeral. However, despite her efforts with her dress, she is still disrespected and humiliated by the white conductor on the train heading to New Orleans. This was proof that no matter how well dressed or behaved a black woman was during that time, they still would not earn the respect of the white community due to the existing prejudice. As much as Helene tried to be a proper middle class woman, she can not escape the racism she encounters. However, by giving the rude and racist conductor a smile, she decides to accept it rather than fight it. Nel heavily judged this moment. After she saw the stares her mother received from the other African-American passengers, she promised to never allow herself to be stared at like that.

‘It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard—always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly.’²¹

Eventually, Nel befriends a girl named Sula. Sula is the complete opposite of Nel. She was raised by Hannah, a woman who grew up as anything but a traditional woman. Sula, like her mother, wanted to live to the fullest. She was the definition of freedom. Nel and Sula were considered two pieces of a whole, as they completed each other. One day, Nel and Sula were accompanied by a neighborhood boy called Chicken Little. Sula was swinging him around, but he slipped away, fell into the river, and drowned. When the boy’s body was found, white people did not care about the death of a black child at all. The bargeman was more annoyed at the fact

²¹ Morrison, T. (1987). Sula. New York, New American Library. (p. 23)

that he had to carry the body to the sheriff. He did not treat the accident as a loss of life - he thought of it as an inconvenience.

Although the novel itself is not mainly about racial prejudice, as it follows specific characters' struggles in their communities, the tone of "white supremacy" can be felt during the entire plot. The Bottom's African-American residents were deemed inferior and worth less than the white citizens. This was obvious when the black residents would be denied job positions, as white residents had an advantage.

6. Conclusion

African Americans have experienced oppression throughout history as a result of the color of their skin. This was brought on by the idea that white people were better or more intelligent only by means of being white. As a result, black people have had a particularly difficult time adjusting to life after slavery was abolished.

Writing about racial issues, Toni Morrison has written quite a few novels which depict how prejudice and oppression can impact an innocent black person's life. She had a long career and has published several novels, with some of her most popular ones being her first novel 'The Bluest Eye', 'Beloved', 'Song of Solomon' and 'Sula'.

Her plot of Morrison's novel 'Beloved' takes place in 1873, and revolves around the post-slavery life of a mother of four, Sethe. Sethe was deeply scarred by the events from her past, as she was enslaved at a Kentucky plantation called Sweet Home. After her escape from Sweet Home, Sethe, as traumatized as she was, attempted to murder all of her children, but managed to kill only her first-born daughter. Her late daughter's ghost proceeds to haunt Sethe's house. After the arrival of Paul D and the embodiment of her daughter's spirit, Beloved, Sethe was forced to face her past and stop running away from it.

Every character in 'Beloved' has struggles of their own. But one thing they all share is a devastating past which they are trying to forget. However, to be able to build a healthy future, they all must accept that the past can not be changed, but should also not be swept under the rug. In 'Beloved', we get to understand how much of a significant impact racism and slavery had on black people, to the point where they could never live a normal and peaceful life.

In her first novel, 'The Bluest Eye', Toni Morrison focuses on the internal struggles a young adolescent girl has to go through due to the unreachable beauty standards. The main protagonist, Pecola, is taught from a young age by her surroundings that 'whiteness' is beautiful, and that she is deemed to be ugly due to the color of her skin. This type of ideology takes away Pecola's innocence and forces her to grow up in an environment that wakes up all sorts of negative feelings towards herself. The reader gets to understand how racist ideologies can have a significant influence on the most innocent person in a society - a child.

Although Morrison's novel 'Sula' does not directly speak about racial injustice, but mainly focuses on the characters' relationships and their status in their community, there are several situations that depict racism directly or indirectly. For instance, when a black boy fell into a river and drowned, the white bargeman who found him treated him as an inconvenience, rather than a human life being lost. This goes to show how insignificant a black person's life was to white people who were driven by racist beliefs.

Through her evocative storytelling, Morrison captures the intricate ways in which racial prejudice infiltrates societies, leaving behind scars that persist across generations. Importantly, as we turn the final pages of these novels, we are left with an undeniable truth: racism is not a relic of the past. The experiences from Morrison's fictional characters are the lived reality for many people. Morrison's books drive us to acknowledge the necessity of publicly discussing and dealing with this deeply-rooted issue.

Bibliography

1. Morrison, T. (1998). *Beloved*. Random House large print ed. New York, Random House Large Print in association with Alfred A. Knopf.
2. Morrison, T. (1999). *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage.
3. Morrison, T. (1987). *Sula*. New York, New American Library.
4. Peach, L. (2011). Toni Morrison. In J. Duvall (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, pp. 233–243). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CCOL9780521196314.019
5. Mahaffey, P. D. (2004). The Adolescent Complexities of Race, Gender, and Class in Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye." *Race, Gender & Class*, 11(4), 155–165. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496824>
6. Babbitt, S. E. (1994). Identity, Knowledge, and Toni Morrison's "Beloved": Questions about Understanding Racism. *Hypatia*, 9(3), 1–18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810186>
7. Bump, J. (2010). Racism and Appearance in *The Bluest Eye*: A Template for an Ethical Emotive Criticism. *College Literature*, 37(2), 147–170. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20749587>

8. Putnam, A. (2011). *Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Sula, Beloved, and A Mercy*. *Black Women, Gender + Families*, 5(2), 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.5406/blacwomegendfami.5.2.0025>
9. DIZARD, R. (2010). *Toni Morrison, the Slave Narratives, and Modernism*. *The Massachusetts Review*, 51(2), 389–405. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25750489>
10. Moglen, H. (1993). *Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's "Beloved."* *Cultural Critique*, 24, 17–40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354128>
11. Caesar, T. P. (1994). *Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's "Beloved."* *Revista de Letras*, 34, 111–120. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27666617>
12. Krumholz, L. (1992). *The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's Beloved*. *African American Review*, 26(3), 395–408. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041912>
13. Zamalin, A. (2014). *Beloved Citizens: Toni Morrison's "Beloved", Racial Inequality, and American Public Policy*. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 42(1/2), 205–211. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24364924>
14. LeClair, Thomas. Interview. "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." *New Republic* 184 (21 March 1981): 25-29.
15. Smedley, A. (2023, August 22). *racism*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/racism>

16. Urofsky, M. I. (2023, August 4). *Jim Crow law*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law>
17. Romer, C. D. and Pells, . Richard H. (2023, July 3). *Great Depression*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/money/topic/Great-Depression>
18. *History.com Editors*. (May 11, 2023). *Black History Milestones: Timeline. HISTORY*. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones>
19. *Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia* (2023, August 15). *Toni Morrison*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Toni-Morrison>
20. Stein, K. F. (1984). *Toni Morrison's Sula: A Black Woman's Epic*. *Black American Literature Forum*, 18(4), 146–150. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2904289>
21. Morrison, T., & McKay, N. (1983). *An Interview with Toni Morrison*. *Contemporary Literature*, 24(4), 413–429. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208128>
22. Furman, J. (2014). *Black Girlhood and Black Womanhood: The Bluest Eye and Sula*. In *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Revised and Expanded Edition (REV-Revised)*, pp. 12–30. University of South Carolina Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6wgck3.6>
23. Kuenz, J. (1993). *The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity*. *African American Review*, 27(3), 421–431. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041932>

24. Walther, M. L. (1990). *Out of Sight: Toni Morrison's Revision of Beauty*. *Black American Literature Forum*, 24(4), 775–789. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041802>
25. Cormier-Hamilton, P. (1994). *Black Naturalism and Toni Morrison: The Journey away from Self-Love in The Bluest Eye*. *MELUS*, 19(4), 109–127. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468206>