The Construction of Identity and Beauty in Toni Morrison's Novels

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Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku
Diplomski sveučilišni studij Anglistike (dvopredmetni)

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Zadar, 2021.

Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

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Zadar, 09. studenog 2021.

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1. Introduction

The central aim of this thesis is to analyze the patterns of African American identity construction in Toni Morrison's novels through the prism of various social constructs, namely, beauty, ugliness, trauma and stigma. The thesis further seeks to investigate the notion of beauty in particular, and the impact it has on the members of the African American community, especially in contrast to Eurocentric beauty standards. For the purpose of this thesis, two novels by Toni Morrison were analyzed: *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *A Mercy* (2008). Toni Morrison is well known for her specific use of language and themes, as well as uniquely portrayed characters of African American ancestry.

To start with, theoretical background concerning identity theories will be explained in order to better analyze and apply those theories to Morrison's work. The concept of beauty will also be examined theoretically and a chapter will be dedicated to previous similar research.

Theoretical part will then be applied to selected novels of Toni Morrison. The first work presented in the thesis is Morrison's first and probably the most famous novel, *The Bluest Eye*. The title itself connotatively draws attention to the concept of white privilege in a sense of white people being considered superior to black people in multiple aspects. This concept greatly influences black characters in the formation of their identity, which is also explored in this thesis. Another piece written by Morrison called *Playing in the Dark* is used to further support this theory. *A Mercy*, the second novel analyzed, seeks to investigate how various traumas affect one's identity formation. Except for the concept of identity, the thesis will also examine to what extent does the notion of beauty impact identity construction in both novels.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Identity theories

The concept of identity construction has always been present in social sciences and humanities. With the recent social changes, especially the rise of globalization, the question of identity is still the focus of various researchers' attention. To form the analytical framework of this thesis the work of Steph Lawler *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* in which she offers an overview of different identity theories was used. Furthermore, Frantz Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* was considered as it focuses on how one's race is related to their identity construction and as such can be applied to Morrison's work.

The first theory elaborated in this thesis is the one in which "identity needs to be understood not as belonging 'within' the individual person, but as produced between persons and within social relations." (Lawler 19) The author further elaborates the identity theories via Norbert Elias' work and states that "how we understand ourselves is an effect of knowledge or truths that circulate about the self." (17) On the other hand, she argues that there are some forms of identity that are mutually exclusive and cannot be combined. Examples include being a man or a woman and being black or white (Lawler 11). Furthermore, Henri Tajfel wrote about social identity theory and how it "starts from the assumption that people's social identity derives from their membership of various groups. It further assumes that individuals are motivated to achieve a positive self-image and that such may be enhanced by a positive evaluation of one's own group." (Tajfel 608)

In the *Foreword to the 2008 edition* to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), Ziauddin Sardar refers to the problem of internalization of inferiority: "When the black man comes into contact with the white world he goes through an experience of sensitization. His ego collapses. His self-esteem evaporates. He ceases to be a self-motivated person. The entire purpose of his behavior is to emulate the white man, to become like him, and thus hope to be

accepted as a man" (Sardar in Fanon xiii). In *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) Fanon psychoanalytically explored attitudes that Negroes develop when in contact with white civilization and states: "If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily, economic; subsequently, the internalization – or, better, the epidermalization – of this inferiority." (4) He further describes this state of mind that black people develop:

"For him there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world. Whence his constant preoccupation with attracting the attention of the white man, his concern with being powerful like the white man, his determined effort to acquire protective qualities – that is, the proportion of being or having that enters into the composition of an ego. As I said earlier, it is from within that the Negro will seek admittance to the white sanctuary. The attitude derives from the intention." (36)

Frantz Fanon's work is notably relevant for this thesis as he explored colonialism in relation to language, culture, man – woman relationships, etc. and suggested that:

"Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle." (9)

Fanon's revelations are encouraged by his own experiences. He describes how the color of his skin is something other people always point out about him, as if the black person is black before they are a person: "When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color." (88) He also writes about how black people inherited the past of their ancestors, including not only color of their skin

but cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, slave-ships, etc. and he accepts it, but he thinks it is time to move on as he only "wanted to be a man, nothing but a man." (Fanon 84-85) For Fanon, the future of the blacks is not ideal, but it can be what they make of it: "I resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an *inborn complex*, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN. Since the others hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known." (87)

In light of this, Ron Eyerman explored slavery and the effect it had on formation of African American identity in a theory he called *cultural trauma*. He sees slavery or complete subordination to the will of others as a collective memory. It is through the collective memory of slavery that African Americans form their identities, and according to Eyerman, many of them did not necessarily have to experience slavery themselves to be affected by it (1). Eyerman defines cultural trauma as "a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion." (2)

Another theory of identity relevant for Morrison's novels is related to history and inheritance. It is believed that the answer to the question about our identity is provided through knowledge of who our ancestors were. Of course, we inherit some genetic properties from our parents and grandparents (such as hair and eye color, height, etc.). However, we can also make sense of our identity through our ancestors' character traits (Lawler 45-46). If the knowledge of the history of our family is crucial to forming our identity, how is that same identity formed in people who were abandoned by their parents and adopted? Lawler suggests that: "This problem may take many forms, but it is commonly expressed as having a missing or partial self, not knowing the true self, being unaware of who one 'really' is, or having a self that is out of place or does not belong where it is." (Lawler 57)

Finally, a theory of identity worth mentioning in relation to literary works is the narrative theory. Lawler suggests that characters actually produce their own identity by collecting

different memories and experiences about themselves throughout the story. It is through the interpretations of their lives that people form an overall plot (24, 43). This proves the already mentioned theory that our identities are not innate but produced. Paul Ricoeur was one of the key philosophers in the development of narrative theory and the impact it has on formation of one's identity. He formed a hypothesis in which he argues: "do not human lives become more readily intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them?" (188) A certain sub-aspect of narrative theory are the so-called trauma narratives. Lawler points out that those narratives often deal with traumas such as abusive childhoods and offer suffering as an essential means for producing an identity (36).

2.2 The concept of beauty

An important concept to consider when analyzing Morrison's work is the concept of beauty. It is difficult to define what beauty really stands for, as it is seen as a rather subjective concept. It is essential to differentiate beauty resting in the object and beauty resting within the observer (Friel 2017). There are numerous theories and interpretations of beauty as such, and its final definition will likely remain missing forever.

Beauty standards change from one age to another and depend on the society or the ideology which is predominantly exercised in a particular society (Trisnawati 75). Trisnawati provides an explanation of how certain dominant groups among society exercise their culture, commonsense and philosophy until it becomes a dominant ideology. Society members then go on to embrace these as the beauty standards and people start to compare themselves depending on whether they are able to adhere to those standards (76). Specifically, this discrepancy between dominant and subordinate groups is obvious in American society where "apparently White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WAPS) has been inherently put as the dominant group whereas the African American is consciously placed as one of the subordinate ones.

Hence, the beauty standards are the products of WAPS' people. The standards are to follow and conform with the White people's standard e.g. White beauty standards. The beauty standard could cover the appearance from the hair style, body shape, eyes, skin, etc." (Trisnawati 77) Moreover, George Lipsitz argued that the extent of such hegemonic White beauty standards is used to manipulate other social groups and lead them to intra-racial discrimination:

"The power of whiteness depended not only on white hegemony over separate racialized groups, but also on manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another, to compete with each other for white approval, and to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized populations." (Lipsitz 3-4)

Modern beauty standards were greatly influenced by the West, which historically played a defining role in the creation of the perception of beauty, be it conforming to a body type typical for white women or valuing Western art more than that of indigenous people. By placing white beauty standards on a pedestal, the black identity begins to lose value, resulting in black women suffering loss of personal identity as they are forced to conform to beauty standards impossible for them to achieve (Melodia Festa 210).

Following the above-mentioned beauty standards, Frantz Fanon further developed the theory of whiteness seen as something beautiful, and blackness seen as something ugly. For him, whiteness is the symbol of purity, and blackness is the opposite (Sardar in Fanon xiii). In the *Foreword to the 2008 edition* Ziauddin Sardar explored the terms *whiteness* and *blackness* using dictionaries and found as many as 120 synonyms for each term, where *whiteness* had mostly positive connotations and *blackness* had exclusively negative connotations. He went beyond to showcasing how being white is seen as something powerful stating that "even the Merciful God is white, with a bushy beard and bright pink cheeks." (Sardar in Fanon xiii)

2.3 Africanist presence in literature

Playing in the Dark is one of Morrison's highly appreciated works published in 1992., as a sequence of three lectures held two years prior to the book publication at the William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in American Studies at Harvard University. It is a collection of essays which consists of three main chapters, namely *Black Matters, Romancing the Shadow* and *Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks*. It is a unique work of literary criticism which has significantly contributed to and, at the same time, enriched the American literary canon in terms of the quest for African American identity. Moreover, by creating this compilation, Morrison has successfully reversed the pattern of analyzing the construction of black identity through the prism of whiteness and, instead, made the notion of whiteness literary subordinate.

In the sole beginning of *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison unambiguously shows readers what was the thought process behind this work. "I was interested, as I had been for a long time, in the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them. In fact, I had started, casually, like a game, keeping a file of such instances." (Morrison VII) Moreover, the author uses her lectures to highlight the roles and characteristics which African American characters are often ascribed to in the literature, especially in the works written by white authors. In this case, Morrison's interest is neither the literature itself, nor its artistic value, but the consequences that such writing can leave on both individuals and society in general. She is both subtle and careful when analyzing other works and does not want to, by any means, label any of them as good or bad, instead, she simply focuses on their contribution to the construction of white and black identities.

According to Morrison, the construction of Africanism and Africanist presence in literature appears to have followed three chronological stages: The least complex, in which

white superiority was a consequence of social hierarchy and the white Americans dogma of their innate superiority over African slaves. This conviction is exactly what fueled the slave trade, as it became a circular truth: in order to feel superior, the Europeans had to keep enslaving Africans. In an attempt to justify this belief, the Europeans had to paint Africans as wild, ignorant, savage and inherently different, thus inferior to them.

In the second stage of constructing the black identity in American literature, European authors created an Africanist persona. This was used as a means of self-reflection in order to dwell on the social identity of whites. Morrison writes about the ability to see in these works a meditation on the white authors, who through writing about Africans explored their own psyches (17).

Finally, the third stage is metaphorical but manages to thrive in the minds of the public, nonetheless. Here black characters and the idea of blackness itself are given symbolic attributes which make white readers fear them and sympathize with them at the same time. In this contrast, black becomes inherently negative: sinful, pure, good, evil, moral and immoral (52). By portraying black characters as either of these extremes, they are deemed inferior since they are never portrayed as complex individuals but rather as either meek and kind servants or scary and dangerous outlaws.

According to Morrison, the inclusion of background black characters in a story serves as a metaphor for social decay and economic division which has been rampant in the United States ever since the beginnings of the slave trade (Morrison 63). By using stereotypes in depictions of black characters, whether by displacing, condensating or fetishizing them, these authors are creating a real-life narrative in the minds of their readers that did not exist there naturally. This is exactly how race became a social construct, rather than a biological divide. (Klein and Amin 15)

In *Playing in the Dark,* Morrison further analyzes various ways in which this is evident among crucial works of American classic literature. The examples that she uses can be found in Hemingway's, Cather's, Poe's work, etc. In Hemingway's novel titled *To Have and Have Not*, the character of Harry talks about black females in general, describing them as "nurse shark". (Hemingway qtd. in Morrison 85) By talking about black women in such a dehumanizing way, Harry expresses his view of them as so far from human that they are not even described as mammals. By specifying them as sharks, he also gives them a dangerous and predatory feel, which is in women displayed by their sexuality rather than aggression as it would be with men. Still, by naming them nurses he highlights their femininity and nurturing nature. (Morrison 85)

It may seem shocking to suddenly look at these classic authors which have long been thought of as symbols of American literature through a racial lens, which is exactly why Morrison makes it clear that she does not mean to accuse these authors of racism. Her goal in this particular work was to analyze the social constructs which have impacted these novels, as well as the impact they have in turn, had on society. What is more, many of these novels were intended solely for the white audience, as they were created at a different point in time. As much as the racial divide still seems to dwell in society, by analyzing these works it became apparent that society has changed greatly since today these works would be considered racist. However, at the time, simply writing about black characters was a big feat, and Morrison recognizes and admires the attempts of these authors to cross the racial divide. (Morrison XIII)

3. Previous research

Numerous theses and dissertations have already been dedicated to exploring the formation of identity and the concept of beauty in Toni Morrison's novels. Jennifer S. Convey in her thesis *The Search for Cultural Identity: An Exploration of the Works of Toni Morrison* (2007) explores different ways in which Toni Morrison's characters either embrace the white culture or deny it. The main question of the thesis is whether it is possible for black people to ignore the white culture completely and, respectively, whether those who embrace it are betraying their own cultural identity. Convey concluded that Morrison's characters are to meet halfway with their oppressors since they cannot live entirely authentically.

Vida de Voss in her thesis *The Identity Challenge in Toni Morrison's "Paradise"* (2010) attempted to explore the identity question through philosophy and psychoanalysis, arguing that self is the twin of every "other". The same author wrote a dissertation in 2017 called *Identity as Ethical Responsibility: A Manifesto for Social Change in Toni Morrison's Fiction* in which she intended to demonstrate how in Morrison's fiction "identity is constructed in relation to an ethical responsibility for the other." (3) For the purpose of conducting her thorough study De Voss analyzed Morrison's *The Bluest Eye, Tar Baby, Paradise* and *A Mercy* and concluded that each of the novels calls for emphatic social change.

Romaissa Abdou and Salssabil Drehim in their dissertation *Search for Identity in Toni Morriosn's "The Bluest Eye"* (2018) seek to examine the extent of white dominance upon black people while applying two main theories: New Historicism and feminist theory. It's a rather different approach to the analysis of Morrison's work which takes into consideration author's history, as well as the nature of patriarchal communities. The authors see the black female's identity as always defined by her relationship with men.

Radka Havlíková in her thesis *The Beauty Standards in Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye"* (2011) focused on the white beauty standard and the consequences it had on African American women. In addition to analyzing how white beauty standards affect the protagonist Pecola, the author explored the main narrator of the story as well. According to the author, Claudia is portrayed as a black girl who is able to refuse the standards of beauty imposed on her.

Another interesting research which came across is *Struggle and Survival in Cultural Clash: A Case Study of Pecola in The Bluest Eye* written by Bin Yuan. The research explains the act of black people identifying with mainstream culture, which is exactly what made Pecola break down. In another research called *The Theme of the Shattered Self in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and A Mercy,* the author Manuela López Ramírez compared how psychological trauma influenced the identity formation of the characters Pecola and Sorrow.

Gurleen Grewal applied a postcolonial approach to Toni Morrison's work in her book *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison.* Grewal considers the crisis of race in the United States the main catalyst of Morrison's fiction:

"The origins of the crisis are not particularly obscure: the cultural and political meaning of race, its significance in shaping social structure, and its experiential or existential dimensions all remain profoundly unresolved as the United States approaches the end of the twentieth century. As a result, the society as a whole and the population as individuals suffer from confusion and anxiety about the issue (or complex of issues) we call race." (2)

A part of the book is dedicated to postcolonial approach to *The Bluest Eye*, and the author claims that "the profound value of this novel lies in its demystification of hegemonic social processes in its keen grasp of the way power works, the way individuals collude in their own oppression by internalizing a dominant culture's values in the face of great material contradictions." (Grewal 21)

There have also been various collections of essays and case studies concerning Morrison's work which delve into the recurring themes of her literature, such as slavery, trauma, mother-child relationship, etc. *Contested Boundaries: New Critical Essays on the Fiction of Toni Morrison* is just one such collection exploring all the themes mentioned above and how they are presented in *A Mercy,* as opposed to all of her previous novels. Perhaps the most interesting part of this thesis is the essay written by Terry Otten who explores the effect that slavery has on motherhood and he concludes that it is the slavery alongside capitalistic greed that has the power to turn the love of a mother to a potential weapon. Moreover, in her book from 2004 *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of The Heart* Andrea O'Reilly offers an extensive depiction of Morrison's theory of African American mothering and how it is articulated in her work. O'Reilly investigates the theme of motherhood in relation to gender hegemonies, slavery, migration and assimilation and she concludes that Morrison through her fiction "applauds the power of motherhood to achieve the personal and cultural changes so desperately and urgently needed in our world today." (172)

All the researchers mentioned above, even though some of them applied completely different approaches to Morrison's work than what is presented in this thesis so far, influenced and contributed to shaping the rest of the thesis. There were theories which simply could not connect to my analysis, for example seeing black female identity as always defined by her relationship with men. However, most of them paved the way to my opinion that it is possible to change the way black identities are formed as well as perceived.

4. The construction of identity in *The Bluest Eye*

Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* is the debut novel of Toni Morrison which offers her views on struggles African Americans face in their everyday lives. Focal point of the novel is the formation of their identity in relation to the dominant white culture and standards of beauty. In *Playing in the Dark,* Morrison highlights how American literature canon, enriched with Africanism between the lines, influenced and helped construct, not only the identity of African Americans, but also Americans. Defining one race or one social group as a superior one, intentionally or not, defines all other races and groups as inferior ones which, subsequently, has an inevitable impact on the identity formation of an individual involved in the process. White identity, as Morrison observes, is solely constructed from not being black: "Deep within the word 'American' is its association with race. American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen." (Morrison 47)

Set in 1940 in Ohio, *The Bluest Eye* follows three households, each representing a typical family still easily recognized in modern American society: a white family, a black family living in a loving environment and a marginalized black family. The Breedlove family is the marginalized one in this novel, and the analysis will mostly explore how the three members of the family form their identities while heavily conforming to the white standards. However, there are characters in the novel who are equally important and who represent refusal to conform to the white standards. The formation of their identities will be analyzed, too.

4.1 Cholly Breedlove's identity

Different theories of identity can be used to examine Cholly's identity formation, the first one being the inheritance theory. As already mentioned, this theory focuses on the formation of one's identity through knowledge of their past and their ancestors. The inability to identify with one's past can lead to having feelings of not belonging anywhere and not knowing one's true self. People who form their identities in this way were either abandoned at a young age by their parents or adopted. They usually tend to adhere to identity standards imposed on them, rather than form their own sense of self.

Cholly was abandoned by his father even before he was born, then by his mother just a few days after his birth: "Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him." (Morrison 160) He was raised by his aunt, who kept reminding him that he owes her his life, but who also passed away.

Not having basically anyone to identify with in his early stages of life, it is no wonder that he cannot accept the father figure in the family:

> "Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parents raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be. […] Had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children." (Morrison, 160-161)

Consequently, Cholly's abusive behavior towards his children, especially Pecola, leads to their family being dysfunctional and it is an example of the impact of not being able to relate to your ancestors. Cholly is not capable of being a loving father to his children because he himself did not receive love as a child. He is also not able to form a strong sense of self, and neither are his children.

Cholly being abandoned as a baby is seen as a traumatic experience crucial to the formation of his identity, but so is his first sexual experience which shaped all of his future relations with women and can actually be seen as the root of his abusive behavior towards his daughter, Pecola. During his first sexual intercourse with a girl he likes, he is interrupted by two white men: "There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it. Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up all in one motion. The men had long guns." (Morrison 147) The two white men were making fun of Cholly and made him finish what he was doing while they were watching. What is interesting about this analysis is Cholly's reaction to this incident. Instead of hating the white men, he developed feelings of hatred towards the girl: "Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her." (Morrison 148)

His reaction can be analyzed in the light of cultural trauma. As mentioned earlier in the theoretical part, the theory of cultural trauma is closely related to the slavery. The impact of slavery on African Americans is considered to be so strong that one does not have to actually experience it to be affected by it. Cultural trauma is developing through collective memory of a group of people in which they are completely subordinate to the will of others, in this case, to the whites. Morrison described Cholly's feelings after the incident:

“Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke.” (Morrison 150-151)

Through his traumatic experience, Cholly is reliving the collective memory of slavery and subordination to the white men. He is conscious that in front of the “big, white and armed men" he is, once again, only “small, black and helpless.” He sees no point in hating the white men, but instead turns his negative emotions toward women. As already stated, the incident has severely affected all Cholly’s future relations with women, which subsequently made him feel free to a certain extent; he will love and beat women, take and leave jobs and even kill three white men in a blink of an eye, remaining fairly indifferent. He simply couldn't care less for his life. However, when he met his wife Pauline, he thought for a moment that his life could change for the better, but soon realized that he would not be able to shake his trauma. He suddenly feels trapped in the marriage and starts to drink heavily. This kind of identity disruption will reflect most in his relationship with Pecola.

Cholly's relationship with his daughter Pecola is a combination of mixed feelings of tenderness and hatred, which keeping in mind Cholly's traumatized past does not come as a surprise. Cholly rapes his daughter twice, and Morrison depicts it vividly while providing the reader with a glimpse of Cholly's mixed emotions: "Cholly stood up and could see only her greyish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again, the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her." (Morrison 163) Cholly's previous traumatic experiences from childhood and adolescence make him abusive towards his daughter. He does not know raping his own child is not normal, because he never had the chance to experience love from his parents and learn what it means to be a loving parent. He hates Pecola in the same way he hated Darlene because a black woman for him is the one who witnessed his inferiority in front of those white men. Cholly's identity is, therefore, a product of his personal and cultural trauma.

4.2 Pauline Breedlove's identity

Pauline Breedlove is yet another character in the novel whose identity is a product of cultural trauma, perhaps even more so than in the case of Cholly. Except for being ridiculed by her peers because of her deformed leg, she lived a more or less happy life back in the south. A crucial point in the development of her identity happens while giving birth to Pecola. In the hospital, a doctor compares black women with animals: "They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses. […] Only one looked at me. […] He knowed, I reckon, that maybe I weren't no horse foaling. But them others. They didn't know." (Morrison 124-125) Moreover, after moving north with Cholly, Pauline is ridiculed for her southern accent and the clothes she wears. All of these experiences combined make her view herself in a derogatory way thanks to her being black, poor, female and ugly, and she desperately seeks to find a different identity.

Surrounded by the white culture's standards, she concludes that she wants to identify with them as much as she can. She does so while neglecting her own family. Throughout the story, there are numerous examples of Pauline negating her own identity while trying to conform to the standards of supreme whiteness. Pauline's admiration of white culture starts off as harmless when she is watching movies and is being introduced to onscreen perfect love and the concept of physical beauty: "White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard." (Morrison 123) Later on in the novel, Pauline expands her forced identification with white standards by finding what she deems the perfect job. She works in a white neighborhood, in a beautiful house with an even more beautiful white girl. This specific surrounding is used by Morrison in order to highlight the correlation between the white race and the upper class:

"It was her good fortune to find a permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative and generous. She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it. [...] Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise." (Morrison 127)

In wanting to find herself another identity, Pauline neglects her own family: "Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. […] More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man…" (Morrison 127) Not having an identity herself, she contributes to the non-existing identity formation of her children: "Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life." (Morrison 128)

This contribution has the strongest impact on Pecola's identity. Taking into consideration the inheritance theory and the importance of knowing who one's ancestors were, the way in which Pauline hindered the formation of her daughter's strong black identity can be analyzed. Pauline does not love Pecola. In fact, she despises her and considers her ugly since the day she gave birth to her: "But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly." (Morrison 126) She refuses to believe Pecola when she said that she was raped. She dismisses Pecola's importance as she yells at her and insults her after she spills blueberries all over the kitchen. At the same time, she turns to the white girl who she immediately starts to comfort: "The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. *Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it.*" (Morrison 109)

Just like Cholly's identity, Pauline's identity can be considered a product of cultural trauma and social relations with others. A turning point in the formation of her identity is giving birth to Pecola, during which time she is seen as an animal. Even though from her early childhood she was not entirely happy with herself, it is from that particular moment that she repeatedly rejects her own identity and is finding comfort in believing that she can fit in with the whites. Just like Cholly who directs his anger towards black women, Pauline is constantly neglecting her own family because they remind her of everything she does not want to be. Instead of rejecting the white values, Pauline is identifying with them, while negating the values of her own. Together with Cholly, Pauline contributes to the inability of their daughter Pecola to form a strong identity, which will be explored in the following paragraph.

4.3 Pecola Breedlove's identity

Pecola is the main character of the novel whose identity is completely formed through the way others see her and behave towards her. She is a rather vulnerable character, an adolescent coming from a dysfunctional black family, abused by her parents. It has already been stated multiple times how early stages of life are the most important when it comes to forming one's identity, and how the lack of parental love can impact the child negatively. Such is the case with Pecola. To make it even worse, Pecola is not neglected and abused by her parents only, but by almost everyone she encounters: her peers, school teachers, candy store owner and other members of the community. Everywhere she turns people either insult her or behave as if she does not exist, and as a result she feels worthless.

Pecola is mocked for being black by her peers, precisely black boys:

"Heady with the smell of their own musk, thrilled by the easy power of a majority, they gaily harassed her. […] That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant." (Morrison 65)

What is worse in this harassment is that she is being harassed by the members of the black community. If Pecola does not feel acceptance and appreciation of her own, how can she identify with them?

In her school, Pecola sits alone: “She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk. The first letter of her last name forced her to sit in the front of the room always.” (Morrison 45) Teachers also purposely disregarded her: “Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond.” (Morrison 45-46)

If we consider the social identity theory presented in the theoretical part and apply it to this particular case of bullying that Pecola receives in school, it does not come as a surprise that she is not able to form a positive self-image. Keeping in mind that she is an adolescent and fragile, not being accepted in school by neither her teachers nor classmates certainly makes her feel she does not belong there.

Another equally devastating moment of humiliation for Pecola occurs when she goes to the candy store to buy some candy and is humiliated by the white store owner: “Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see.” (Morrison 48) Pecola being a young girl, and buying candies usually seen as a lovely experience for children, this moment yet again proves how rejection must have contributed to the formation of Pecola’s shattered identity.

Perhaps those who are to blame the most for Pecola's shattered self-image are her parents. They act abusively toward her, physically and mentally. Her father raped her twice, and her mother does not even believe that. Her own mother considers her ugly since she was a baby, abuses her verbally and neglects her. Keeping in mind the inheritance theory according to which crucial to our identity formation is the knowledge about our ancestors, Pecola's identity formation can be analyzed in terms of this theory. From our ancestors we inherit not only our genetics, but our character traits as well. It is, of course, possible to form our senses of self independently as we grow older, but during young age we look up to our parents particularly. In her family, Pecola has witnessed nothing but neglect and abuse and, as a result, she feels worthless and wants to be someone else. It is, however, not a coincidence that she wants to be white, since her mother is obsessed with everything white, and her father developed a strong hatred for black women.

It is obvious that Pecola is repeating her parents' patterns. At such a young age, parents should be role models for their children and provide a loving environment in which the children could grow up. This is especially important in African American communities which are trying to reject white supremacy for generations. Unfortunately, Pecola is not that lucky to receive the care she needs from her parents, and it results not only in her not being able to form a strong identity, but she is also so traumatized that she loses her mind. In the end, Pecola makes up an imaginary friend who acts as her double.

Unlike Cholly, whose lack of inherited past has a strong impact on his identity, or Pauline who almost deliberately chooses to neglect her own past and identity, Pecola is just a young girl whose identity is almost entirely constructed through the way others perceive her. Moreover, she does not have the support from her parents to rise above the humiliation she receives from others. The fact that she is bullied even by some members of the black community for sure contributes to Pecola's lack of self-esteem. She unconsciously accepts that she is "subordinate" to others and her identity is, therefore, a product of internalization of inferiority.

Pecola's identity formation and the way she ends up is sad, because she is an adolescent and, unlike her parents who are adults and already have formed identities, she had the opportunity to be different if the circumstances were different. Pecola's story and the environment in which she grows up is the prime example of how other people can contribute to the continuation of the generational trauma and, respectively, what one can do to put an end to it.

4.4 Confirmation of racial identity: Claudia M'Dear

In the beginning of the chapter, three different types of households that Morrison depicts in *The Bluest Eye* were presented. As opposed to the Breedlove family, M'Dears represent a black household in which love and responsibility come above all. This family provides a shelter for Pecola after she is raped, and the daughters Claudia and Frieda befriend her and defend her from the boys that bully her.

Claudia is a young girl who is particularly determined to refuse to adhere to the white mainstream culture that is imposed on her and it is shown multiple times throughout the novel. When she was given a blue-eyed baby doll as a Christmas present, she felt a sudden urge to destroy it: "The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. […] I had only one desire: to dismember it." (Morrison 19-20) Claudia hated pink, blue-eyed baby dolls because she knew what they represented:

"The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, *Awwwww*, but not for me?" (Morrison 22)

After light-skinned girl Maureen insults her, her sister and Pecola for being black, she wants to fight her. She is agitated towards Pecola for just standing there, being indifferent and accepting the insults: "I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes." (Morrison 73-74) Unlike Pecola, who accepts the thought of being black and ugly, Claudia has a strong desire to fight against it.

If the social identity of a person is constructed through the social relations he or she has with other people, it can be observed from Claudia's example how crucial it is to have the opportunity to grow up in a healthy, caring environment. Claudia's family still holds on to their racial identity and never neglect their children or their responsibilities. It affects the identity of Claudia in a way that she accepts who she is and does not seek to find a new identity, be like someone else or conform to the standards imposed on her. She has someone to look up to, unlike Pecola. The household in which M'Dear daughters grow up is an environment in which they can, with the love from their parents, be proud of who they are and, without any hesitation, reject the white mainstream culture. It once again proves the importance of knowing one's history and identity. As opposed to Pecola, who succumbs to her trauma, Claudia is a symbol of the fight against white mainstream culture. Claudia, together with her family, represents hope for the black community and their ability to battle generational trauma.

Another, smaller but equally important contribution to the confirmation of racial identity in the novel is presented through the characters of prostitutes. They are called China, Poland and Maginot Line; they are ugly and dirty and they drink and swear. In short, they choose not to care about others' opinions. Pecola visits them frequently and it is at their place that she finds comfort and feels loved.

5. The concept of beauty in *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*

The concept of beauty in *The Bluest Eye* is intertwined with the construction of identity of the characters. It is according to the imposed beauty standards that they form their identities. The main characters of the novel, Pecola and Pauline, consider themselves ugly because they are black and desperately want to be white. This way of thinking is a result of the already mentioned WAPS beauty standards and is one of the central themes of the novel.

Beauty is a rather subjective concept, but what is considered beautiful is sometimes a result of the dominant ideology exercised in a particular society. In *The Bluest Eye,* or better to say in 19401s Ohio white was beautiful and black was ugly. A symbol of the white beauty standard in the novel is for sure a baby doll which is usually given as a Christmas present to girls: "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." (Morrison 20) In order to show how white beauty imperatives are wherever you go, Morrison provides the reader with rather vivid backstory of Pauline's character and her learning from movies:

"Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit." (Morrison 122).

She could have chosen a more obvious campaign of white beauty, but it would diminish the message of an implicit brainwash. The act of going to the movies is seen as one of the most harmful experiences and it is chosen to attract attention to all the subtle things which promote racism and discrimination, while secretly molding our perception. Racist messages similar to those shown in the movies are so prevalent that they are mostly difficult to see.

They are as commonplace as drinking milk from a Shirley Temple cup. That kind of "unseen" advertisements are the most dangerous for one's identity, as people are exposed to them without even realizing it and, after a while, they start to perceive them as completely normal.

Pauline's identification with the white beauty standards is also shown through what she considers a perfect job: a servant for a white family in their beautiful house in the white neighborhood. By just standing there and being appreciated by them makes her feel worthy and powerful: "Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. They even gave her what she had never had – a nickname – Polly. It was her pleasure to stand in her kitchen at the end of a day and survey her handiwork." (Morrison 128) Her own identification with the white beauty standards would not be that harmful if it did not make her neglect her own family pass those standards on to her children. To her, Pecola is ugly from the moment she gave birth to her, as opposed to the white girl of the Fisher family where she works: "She wore a pink sunback dress and pink fluffy bedroom slippers with two bunny ears pointed up from the tips. Her hair was corn yellow and bound in a thick ribbon. When she saw us, fear danced across her face for a second." (Morrison 108) Next scene shows Pecola spilling blueberries all over the kitchen floor and Pauline knocking her to the floor because of that, while comforting the little white girl who started to cry.

Pauline is negating her own beauty and racial identity. It is the effect of the white mainstream culture and the imposed standards of beauty. Pecola, who is portrayed as a fragile girl with no constructed identity, soon became subject to white culture beauty standards to such an extent that she believes she is ugly, but her parents should have been there to shield her from those destructive thoughts. Instead, they allowed themselves to be manipulated and brainwashed as well. Their past wounded them so badly that when they needed to overcome racist messages against them, they failed to do so.

Hence, Morrison provides readers with a rather vivid description of their perception of ugliness:

"You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question." (Morrison 39)

Morrison goes on to describe that what they think of themselves is confirmed to them through "every billboard, every movie, every glance." (Morrison 39) It is almost impossible to consider oneself beautiful and black at the same time when everyone is always telling you that you are the exact opposite. Claudia's words best describe this toxic environment:

"We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she was—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world." (Morrison 74)

Pecola's tragic story is a proof of how such an environment can affect one's childhood and identity construction. Pecola is a young, black girl who, throughout her short life, has been regarded as nothing but ugly and dehumanized. Her parents abuse her, her teachers ignore her, her peers insult her and some strangers cannot even look at her and act as if she were invisible. Surrounded by the white mainstream culture, Pecola is sure that having blue eyes is a solution to all her problems: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes." (Morrison 46) She believes that blue eyes will make her lovable in front of her parents: "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too." (Morrison 46)

Another episode which shows her fascination with everything that whiteness represents happens when she drinks milk from the Shirley Temple cup: "Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face." (Morrison 19) However, there is also one point in the story when she questions the reason behind prescribed ugliness. It is when she sees dandelions: "Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty. But grown-ups say, 'Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere.'" (Morrison 47) It is during that one time in the novel that she for once, questions the idea of beauty others have toward her. Unfortunately, even if for one second she thought that she might actually be beautiful, the society proved the opposite. In addition, without support from her parents and realizing that her eyes will never be blue, she goes mad.

The one who rejects the standards of white beauty is Claudia. She hates the blue-eyed doll and she also thinks about the process of having a bath in a galvanized zinc tub with loathing: “Then the scratchy towels and the dreadful absence of dirt. The irritable, unimaginative cleanliness. Gone the ink marks from legs and face, all my creations and accumulations of the day gone, and replaced by goose pimples.” (Morrison 22)

Claudia embraces the dirt and finds the cleanliness irritable and unimaginative. She would rather stay dirty and with ink marks on her body. It is obvious from this example that she finds dirt pleasing as it is the symbol of blackness, and the cleanliness she detest because in the world around cleanliness is a white people virtue only.

It has already been stated that the concept of beauty is difficult to define and that it is up to the observer to decide what is beautiful and what is not. However, a problem arises when the pre-given beauty of something or somebody inevitably means the ugliness of something or somebody else. Morrison has intentionally highlighted this problem by showing how, in the times of creation of her characters, only white standards were considered beautiful. She is not trying to say that white is not beautiful, but that not only white is beautiful. The imposed beauty constructions are not only leading to the struggle for a healthy identity of African Americans but possibly to the complete absence of one. African Americans were practically stamped with the word “ugly” on their foreheads for too long and that does not affect only their identities.

"Prescribed" ugliness affects even those who are socially considered beautiful because it forces them to nourish their egos even more. Beauty, at least external, is one of the easiest qualities to establish. However, racial discrimination makes people reconsider and doubt their judgment. For African Americans, this means that, even if they consider themselves beautiful in any way, racist society is there to tell them they are not, and not only that; it tells them that they are not capable of deciding or determining who or what is beautiful. They are deprived of that ability, as well as of being left without a chance to develop any form of a firm identity.

White beauty is a construct that convinces African Americans they are both ugly (from in and out) and stupid for thinking they could be beautiful. Imagine forming your identity and then having it shattered by the society that is surrounding you, or even worse, imagine not having a chance to form it in any way but to simply accept what is prepared for you. While most people in modern society need to imagine this, the utterly realistic characters from Morrison's novels symbolize the voices of each individual whose life revolves around it.

Beauty is a concept much different in *A Mercy* than in *The Bluest Eye*. That is one of the reasons *A Mercy* was chosen to be analyzed in this thesis. As there is no focus on child actors, movie propaganda and American impact on white standards, the idea of beauty is not as obvious as in the previously analyzed novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Nevertheless, with *A Mercy*, Morrison takes the quest for beauty to another, more spiritual level while portraying three different concepts of beauty.

First, physical beauty takes a back stand in the novel as it is barely mentioned or given any relevance. One of the few mentions of physical beauty may be observed in Rebekka and Jacob's first encounter: "When the Europe wife stepped down from the cart, hostility between them was instant. The health and beauty of a young female already in charge annoyed the new wife" (Morrison 50). Another example is Lina's reaction to Sorrow's messy and filthy hair. This suggests that this time Morrison's goal is not to highlight white culture's impact on the perception of physical beauty since that issue is seen as less relevant than the issue of mental health explored in the novel.

On the other hand, material beauty serves as a constant reminder of the racial and economic divide as Jacob visits D'Ortega's property for the first time and becomes infected with the idea of possessing a mansion that luxurious: "[he] envied the house, the gate, the fence. [. . .]. So, might it be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his meadow? And one day, not too far away, to build a house that size on his property?" (qtd. in Lopez-Ramirez 102) In his quest to be able to afford a house like that, Jacob started a new business, thinking only about "a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog" (Morrison 41). Even on his deathbed, Jacob demands to be taken to his still-unfinished home. He does not get to see the "evil" (Morrison 92) manor before succumbing to smallpox, but Rebekka exhibits loyalty to Jacob even in death as she takes his body to the new house with Sorrow, Florens and Lina despite a storm brewing outside.

The characters differing views of the house are in union with their subjective views on life: Jacob's protestant work ethic drives him to desire material wealth, despite his seemingly already perfect life. His privilege, however, allows him to fixate on the one thing he believes will make him happy as for him, possession of a big house is equated with success and material and egoistic satisfaction. In contrast, people like Sorrow and Florens, blacks, slaves, owned and deprived of human dignity look at Jacob's house with simultaneous desire and terror. They crave home they can call their own, the home where they can live freely alongside family, but also mourn for all traumatic assaults and rapes that happened in white people's homes. (Lopez-Ramirez 101) While home could be something truly beautiful in every sense possible, in this case, the concept is perverted to the extent where it becomes a synonym for ugly and dark.

Finally, spiritual beauty emerges as a concept on Jacob's journey to see D'Ortega, during which he is constantly being amazed by the American landscape and its beauty and wilderness: "Breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation, never failed to invigorate him. Once beyond the warm gold of the bay, he saw forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking" (Morrison 16).

Nature portrayals also play a big role in *A Mercy*, whether they signalize a change that is approaching or carry a deeper warning. For instance, the big storm occurring when Jacob dies and is transferred to his new house contrasts the ideal weather he experiences during the aforementioned journey to D'Ortega's mansion. American's landscape leaves a powerful impression on Jacob and it is described in such detail that it also leaves an impression on the reader. This attention to nature's beauty is not incidental but is rather meant to draw attention to America, described as wild and free, in contrast to slavery and everything it represents. Hereby, Morrison's intention was not to advertise America as a beautiful country, but rather use nature's beauty as she reveals its sins as a free country plagued by slavery.

Even though beauty as a concept is not forgotten in *A Mercy*, Morrison goes out of her way not to marvel at any concept of beauty. The reader is left to expect beauty on every corner, hoping for at least one happy moment or ending, but is deprived of it. Not even in the purest acts such as motherly love, birth, altruism, unselfishness and love can the reader recognize happiness or beauty. This is possibly the strongest message provided by the author – there is absolutely nothing beautiful in slavery and it will never be. Beauty is dead in slavery.

6. Trauma and identity in *A Mercy*

Often considered the most poetic of Morrison's work, her 2008 novel titled *A Mercy* takes on an exploration of six characters as narrated by four other characters. Set in the late 1600s, at the dawn of the slave trade, Morrison aims to showcase the universal experience of this era by using multiple characters and perspectives to tell her story. The book's characters come from different ethnic, racial, class and gender backgrounds before America as it is known today was even created. The book does not take a clear stance on any social issues, but simply

tells the tale of the people living through these uncertain times (Eliadi 95). One defining feature which connects the character group is their age, as they are all adolescents, which makes them more vulnerable in their circumstances. Additionally, their age is crucial for their self-examination: Pecola was starting to form her personality in *The Bluest Eye*, as well as the other characters who also found themselves at the brink of adulthood. However, *A Mercy* does not aim to tell the story of the characters, but rather showcases the feeling of this period in any person's life, in contrast to the world they currently live in.

Erik Erikson (qtd. in Berman) considers identity to be a joined expression for goals, roles, and values that one adopts to give its life meaning and direction. He shrewdly observes how one's identity can shape a blueprint for how he lives, acts, and manages his future. "The trauma, however, can also become incorporated into one's identity. The fact that you have to face trauma and how you deal with that trauma can be life-defining. The trauma can be viewed as a turning point in life, or as a reference point for expectations about the future." (qtd. in Berman)

A Mercy can be considered a trauma narrative. Morrison is well aware of trauma's impact on identity formation and, therefore, portrays this devastating process in her characters, especially among those whose identity is yet to be fully formed. She further deepens her analysis of identity and its connection to trauma by assigning all of her characters at least one trauma. It is interesting to observe how the human mind comprehends traumatic events in accordance with the age of the person experiencing it. For instance, the reader can hardly be indifferent when learning about Sorrow's or Florens's past since their traumas are often experienced as more shocking because they are still young. The way the average reader is likely to interpret their personalities and identity is easily predictable; in the process of getting to know them by simply reading about their past and traumas in it, the reader is likely to create an image of each character. However, that image is not merely physical, instead, it is

extensive as it gets and includes all aspects of a person. Moreover, the reader is introduced to the characters *in medias res*, leaving them with the opportunity to exclusively observe the characters through the events of the novel, rather than considering all of their social backgrounds.

6.1 Rebekka

Rebekka Vaark, the wife of the plantation owner whose land the novel is set in, is said to have had a hard life growing up. Her childhood was defined by strict religion, violence, and sexual harassment before her marriage to Jacob Vaark. In the novel, the reader finds out that Jacob first saw Rebekka as she got off the ship that brought her from across the Atlantic. Jacob finds Rebekka as a great companion because of her willingness to work hard, her physical beauty, and the general happy nature of her character. However, they face obstacles in their relationship as all of their children pass away and they are unable to start a family. Despite the melancholy which plagues Rebekka for the rest of her life, she goes on with her wifely duties. Morrison explores how trauma can take away from a person, but still leave them marching on and does not inherently mean loss of sanity.

What permanently changes Rebekka is the death of her husband and her close encounter with death:

"The mourning said Willard, the illness – the effects of all of that were plain as daylight. Her hair, the brassy strands that once refused her cap, had become pale strings drifting at her temples, adding melancholy to her newly stern features. Rising from her sickbed, she had taken control, in a manner of speaking, but avoided as too tiring tasks she used to undertake with gusto. She laundered nothing, planted nothing, weeded never. She cooked and mended.

Otherwise, her time was spent reading a Bible or entertaining one or two people from the village" (Morrison 129).

Rebekka finally breaking down is a result of years of hardships and trauma, an indicative of how even the strongest and happiest of characters are hard-pressed to battle against the lack of hope.

6.2 Sorrow

The character of Sorrow, a slave girl who is shown taking on the slave trade route serves as a symbol of the entire horrifying concept of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Her name is meant to evoke the feeling of sorrow characteristic for that specific period of time. Sorrow spent her entire adolescence on the slave ship and the subsequent sinking of the ship seems inconsequential in her already horrible young life, which may be the reason why it is never made clear whether she washed up on the shore or the whales brought her there: it makes no difference as she is still enslaved. The incident leaves her with amnesia and a disability to remember her name, not that it matters to her white superiors: "Don't mind her name, said the sawyer. You can name her anything you want. My wife calls her Sorrow because she was abandoned. She is a bit mongrelized as you can see. However, be that she will work without complaint" (Morrison 108). After Jacob saves her, she does not fit in with the others. It quickly becomes apparent that Sorrow's trauma and accidental survival left a severe impact on her mind. Things only get worse when she loses a baby she did not even realize she was going to have. Lina, for instance, believes that the mentally ill and singular-looking Sorrow with black teeth, red "woolly hair" and alarming "recurring boils" (Morrison 49, 51) is the worst luck one can meet in person. Sorrow's trauma takes away a part of her, breaking her identity in two. During her hallucinating episodes, Sorrow is not only able to hear, but also

see her other self and, as the person she sees looks exactly like her, she names her Twin: "I'm here', said the girl with a face matching her own exactly. I'm always here" (Morrison 112).

Morrison has been noticeably devoted to telling the story of Twin and it has almost the same importance as the character of Sorrow herself. Twin's name is nothing if not ironic as it could be named "Other Half" according to its characteristics. If Sorrow is scared, Twin is the one to encourage her. She is the one who warns her when she is being naive, the one who takes care of her when no one else even notices something is wrong: "On occasion, she had secret company other than Twin, but not better than Twin, who was her safety, her entertainment, her guide" (Morrison 108). She relies on it more and more every day, having no one else to talk to: "With her, Sorrow never wanted for friendship or conversation" (Morrison 111).

Apparently, Sorrow is deeply impacted by her trauma and is unable to hold onto her sanity as the events she suffers through drive her to develop schizophrenia as a coping mechanism. This does not necessarily imply that she is a weaker person than Rebekka, who takes her initial trauma in stride, but is symptomatic of their differing circumstances: while Rebekka is still privileged in living a life free of existential cares, Sorrow's circumstances seem to be an unending series of horrible experiences and it is no wonder she succumbs to her trauma.

It is not possible to tell a story of Sorrow without realizing how much she resembles Pecola from *The Bluest Eye*. The two girls are both victims of their trauma who invent an imaginary friend or a Twin as a coping mechanism. However, while Pecola's story ends up tragically, Sorrow is able to reverse the situation and to feel complete through motherhood.

6.3 Florens

Another slave girl presented in *A Mercy* is Florens, a slave girl whose exact age is never given. One of the reasons could be that the novel is told in a non-linear structure and another

that it is simply not important. However, it can be concluded that she is an adolescent. Her father was never even mentioned, hence, it is difficult to say with complete certainty whether or not she has suffered due to his absence. However, it may be assumed that she feels the void of not having both parents. Florens' childhood is traumatic as she is a child slave raised on the plantation cruelly ruled by D'Ortega, who is presumed to be the father of Florens' half-brother. She lived and served there with her mother and little brother and the only trauma she remembers from that period of her life is her mother's abandonment. Florens' identity is deeply wounded by her mother's abandonment and she has a sense of not belonging anywhere, which, as mentioned already, is a typical condition of those who do not know their parents or were abandoned at a very young age.

As seen from her perspective, her mother gave up on her because she does not love her and prefers her brother over her. The truth is, when Jacob Vaark visits the plantation to pick up some money D'Ortega owed him, he is offered to take any slave he wanted instead. After he chooses Florens' mother, she begs him to take her daughter instead as an act of the ultimate sacrifice. Florens' misunderstanding of the situation is indicative of her age, as for a child the priority is to stay close to their mother, even if it means a harder life. Florens is given to Jacob and is traumatized by her mother's decision. Not only is she separated from her mother and brother, but she also has trouble fitting into her new community thanks to the language barrier, leaving her without part of her identity. Florens experiences humiliation when she is accused of being a witch: "They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition." (Morrison 110) In the story it is 1690, and this situation can be considered the beginning of what we now know as racial discrimination.

However, as Florens grows older and has a baby of her own, she comes to understand her mother and channel her trauma into good:

> "Sorrow's change alone seemed to them as an improvement; she was less addle-headed, more capable of handling chores. But her baby came first, and she would postpone egg-gathering, delay milking, interrupt any field chore if she heard a whimper from the infant always somewhere nearby. Having helped with her delivery, they assumed godfather status, even offering to mind the baby if Sorrow needed them to. She declined, not because she did not trust them; she did, but out of a need to trust herself" (Morrison 130).

Furthermore, Sorrow recovers from her trauma not only mentally, but also physically. At this point, she is able to trust herself with taking care of her baby, which allows her to grow as a person and forgive her mother.

As noted above, trauma can disrupt one's sense of identity, and one's identity can affect the way one perceives and recovers from the trauma (Berman). The easiest way to comprehend this is to look at Rebekka, Florens, and Sorrow through the eyes of the people close to them. While others only notice changes in their behavior and actions, women go through various emotional changes from within. What other people perceive as normal or usual behavior of the three of them is not normal, given that their "till then"- identities soaked up previous traumas as well.

7. Conclusion

Toni Morrison is one of the most renowned names, not only in the African American community, but also among great American writers. Decades after the publication of her most well-known novel, *The Bluest Eye,* this work remains relevant and thought-provoking in the face of ongoing racial injustice happening in the United States and all over the world. Some of the main concepts in Morrison's work revolve around the black identity and how it relates to the notion of beauty, which is what the thesis focused on. Its goal was to explore how the characters in Morrison's novels form their identities, both internally and with regards to the society influencing their worldview. In addition, the thesis examined how the importance of beauty of all different kinds inspires the actions of the characters in Morrison's novels.

A chapter of this thesis was also dedicated to Morrison's collection of essays *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. The reason behind this particular choice lies in an attempt to understand Morrison's point of view on the construction of black identity in American literature. The author proposes that the black identity, as it is known in the media today, was created in three chronological stages. In this literary critic she investigated some of the most prominent American writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Alan Poe and explained how the inclusion of black characters in their work influenced the image of blackness as it is known today. Despite the fact that some aspects of these writers' work could today be considered racist, Morrison is careful to highlight the fact that she considers neither the writers nor their novels as racist or problematic but rather chooses to analyze them in order to get a better understanding on the history of blackness in literature.

The first novel presented was Morrison's most notable novel *The Bluest Eye*. This dramatic story of a poor black girl named Pecola deals with the consequences of the prevalence of white beauty standards on black communities, particularly among women and adolescents. Moreover, the adolescent age of the main character proves as a great tool for the

further exploration of personal identity. In this light, Morrison has truthfully painted a picture of a tragic home life influenced by economic and social injustices deriving from the racial inequality in the United States. By elaborating on these so thoroughly, Morrison explains how all these important concepts influence the real lives of young black people. Through Pecola's slow descent into madness, the reader is able to witness a plethora of issues regarding race, identity and beauty.

Having established Morrison's view on blackness in literature, the second work to be analyzed is her 2008 novel titled *A Mercy*. This omnibus revolving around several characters located on a slave plantation in the late 1600s explores different notions of blackness, how identity is formed during adolescence and different ways in which people, namely women, react to trauma in circumstances given. As discussing mental health issues become more and more prominent in the mainstream media, *A Mercy* proves to be even more interesting since it discovers different methods of coping with debilitating trauma.

What can we take from Morrison's work? If we look solely at the concepts explored in this thesis, perhaps the most important one to focus on is the formation of identity. There has been a lot of talk of beauty standards in the last couple of years and, as important as this discussion is, it seems that the diversification of beauty is no longer a battle, instead, more of an inevitable future as we approach a more heterogeneous world.

On the other hand, the importance of identity and individualism is often lost among other, objectively more serious and important issues, especially when discussing race. However, as noted multiple times throughout the thesis, it seems that adolescence can prove quite a sensitive time and serious trauma can come out of the inability to safely go through the regular phases of growing up.

Finally, there are various lessons one can take from Morrison's work and humanity is one of the most crucial lessons ought to be acquired. The human race is given the privilege of

growing up in an equilibrium, in a stable environment and yet, we still choose resentfulness, prejudice and hatred. Perhaps the most widespread wound to humanity is racism and, to this day, overcoming it seems centuries away. Despite the fact not everyone is affected by it, all of the global communities should consider implementing tools for raising more awareness, as well as leaning towards a world of higher tolerance, mindfulness and empathy.

SUMMARY

The Construction of Identity and Beauty in Toni Morrison's Novels

For decades, Toni Morrison has been one of the most prominent African American writers, whose lifelong dedication mirrors in redefining the laws of (in)equality via rich literary opus. By analyzing her novels *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*, this thesis' primary aim is to explore the construction of the *black* identity in relation to the concepts of trauma, ugliness and dominant beauty standards. The historic construction of the *black* identity as investigated by Toni Morrison is being successfully merged with other significant scholars' arguments. The identity theories proposed by Stephanie Lawler, as well as Franz Fanon's psychoanalytic theory, Henri Tajfel's social identity theory and finally, Ron Eyerman's cultural trauma theory serve as a background for the analysis of Morrison's work.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye, Playing in the Dark, A Mercy, blackness, beauty, identity, trauma

SAŽETAK

Konstrukcija identiteta i ljepote u romanima Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison se desetljećima smatra jednom od najutjecajnijih afroameričkih spisateljica čija se cjeloživotna posvećenost ogleda u redefiniranju zakona (ne)jednakosti kroz bogati književni opus. Analizom djela *Oko savršeno modro* i *Neka vrsta milosti,* primarna svrha ovog diplomskog rada jest istražiti formiranje identiteta u crnaca na koje uvelike utječu trauma, ružnoća i dominantni standardi ljepote. Kroz proučavanje konstrukcije crnačkog identiteta, Morrison se oslanja i na diskusije drugih relevantnih akademika. Kao podloga za detaljnu analizu gore navedenih djela poslužit će teorije identiteta Stephanie Lawler, psihoanalitička teorija Frantza Fanona, socijalna teorija identiteta Henrija Tajfela te teorija kulturne traume autora Rona Eyermana.

Ključne riječi: Toni Morrison, Oko savršeno modro, Igra u mraku, Neka vrsta milosti, crnilo, ljepota, identitet, trauma

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