TONI MORRISON AND MAYA ANGELOU AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE IDENTITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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(Toni Morrison i Maya Angelou i njihov utjecaj na identitet Afroamerikanki)

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1. Introduction

Literature has always represented a significant part of the identity of all ethnicities and groups of people. In the case of minority groups, literature and literary works were often the only means of expressing the struggles, troubles, victories, and celebrations of a community. By containing the most important ideas and emotions of people from various backgrounds, classes, economic states and upbringings, literature serves as a timeless proof of the evolution of a group. In the context of African American culture, its literature is a testimony of the hardships and victories the community has experienced since it arrived in the United States until the 21st century. By verbally passing on tales or writing down their life stories, African American authors created a legacy that continues to grow throughout the present day. Authors of African American literature used their status to tell the stories of the masses nobody could or wanted to hear. African American female writers such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou played an important role in retelling those stories. Through their description of the position and perception of African American women from the times of slavery up to the most recent years, both authors presented the conditions and hardships women had to face in everyday life. Their literary works proved to be an important part of reclaiming African American women's identity, as well as their fight for equal rights in modern society.

This paper aims to examine the influence African American female writers Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou had on the development of the identity of African American women in the 20th and 21st centuries. Through the presentation of the beginnings and important authors of African American literature from its creation up to the 21st century, the paper will provide a literary and cultural context to the topic of African American identity. By analyzing the social and political happenings in the 20th and 21st centuries as the biggest drivers for change in the African American community, the paper will present a historical background for shaping

African American women and their identities as well as the struggles they endured during that period. Through an analysis of four books written by two of the most prominent African American female authors, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together In My Name*, the paper will examine how the authors' description and perception of African American women influenced the creation of the African American female identity as it is known today.

2. The beginnings of African American literature

2.1. African American oral tradition

According to Andrews, African American literature is described as a "body of literature written by Americans of African descent" (2024). The definition provided by Andrews, as precise as it is, disregards the oral tradition as a crucial part of African American literature. As Lawrence Buell states, according to Irele, "Literature in my notion is of it comprises potentially all written and oral utterances, insofar as anything made out of words can be traced as a literary artifact" (2011:22). Because the earliest examples of African American literature can be traced back to oral tradition, it is important to emphasize its significance as a part of the literature and the development of African American culture.

From the 1500s to the 1800s, approximately 15 million African people were captured and sent off to the United States for slavery. The slaves' homeland communities in Africa were built on a religious system in which the spoken word held immense power. They believed in Nommo or the "generative power of the spoken word" (Hamlet 2011:27). African people believed that Nommo had the power to create life and that it could give man the ability to master things in his surroundings (Hamlet 2011:27). Upon their arrival to the United States, African people were separated from their families and the culture they were heavily connected to. Without the ability to read or write, the only thing they could rely on was their language (Prentice Hall 1999:IV). The slaves' belief in the power of the spoken and written word became the foundation of their communication with each other. Despite being separated from people who spoke the same language as them, African slaves were able to continue their oral tradition because of similar basic structures of the numerous vocabularies and languages. By sharing their stories in a combination of their native languages and American English, the slaves

adapted to the situation and continued their literary tradition as a way of surviving the horrors of slavery and torture. Because of their adaptation to the new circumstances, the real start of African American literature lies in the oral tradition that preceded any written piece of literature. The oral tradition included pieces of literature that were not written down but shared verbally among the people – stories, songs, old sayings, and proverbs. Before physically preserving their traditions and stories, African American people used their voices as "a fundamental vehicle for cultural expression and survival" (Hamlet 2011:27).

The two most common types of African American literature shared by oral tradition since the 19th century were folk tales and folk songs, with one of the most famous types of folk songs being the spirituals. A spiritual is defined as a religious folk song closely linked to the enslavement of African people in the South of the United States. The term 'spiritual' derives from the King James Bible translation – more precisely, from the translation of Ephesians 5:19: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs/Singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord". The roots of spirituals can be traced back to the informal gatherings of African slaves who would meet in so-called 'praise houses' or 'bush meetings'. During those meetings, the participating slaves would sing, dance, and chant. The origin of spirituals can also be traced back to early plantation slaves who partook in the 'ring shout' – a shuffling circular dance performed while chanting and handclapping. Contrary to its popularity among the community, the spiritual was not an originally African American way of communicating and celebrating. Because of their connection to words and music in their motherland, African American slaves incorporated music into their everyday lives in the United States. The Caucasian slave owners, aggravated by their celebratory ways, banned their worship and introduced the slaves to Christianity in the 17th century. Noticing parallels between their lives and Biblical stories, African American slaves started singing spirituals as a way of expressing their hopes, fears, and sorrows. The African American Spiritual, also referred to as the Negro

Spiritual, is considered one of the most significant forms of American folk songs (Library of Congress).

Even though the oral tradition of passing on stories existed in the narratives created before the Civil War, before former slaves told or wrote their autobiographies, little attention is paid to the oral tradition of African American literature compared to its written counterpart. There are a few reasons for that occurrence. Firstly, scholars of the time considered written documents reliable and trustworthy sources of information that were objective. Situations told from the first-person perspective are often shaped by a person's emotions regarding the conditions, which can have a great influence on the accuracy of the story. Another reason was the opinion that an individual's story, whether they are Caucasian or African American, did not hold great value in comparison to the testimonies of a larger group. The last reason was the fact that younger generations of African Americans were not interested in the stories told by their ancestors. These reasons combined with the general attitudes towards African Americans throughout history have resulted in the oral tradition being put in the background of literary history (Turner 1990:8-10). The oral tradition is often seen only as "the 'first stories' of a pre-literate culture" of many minority ethnicities such as African Americans or Africans (Jones 1991:1). Despite not being recognized as a significant part of the literature, the oral tradition played an important role in developing African American culture and its social identity (Hamlet 2011:28).

Despite the historical and cultural neglect, the African American oral tradition represents an important pillar of African American literature and the culture of the community. Jones argues that "one might say that the foundation of every literary tradition is oral, whether it is invisible or visible in the text" (1991:3). Even with the spotlight often being placed on the written literature of African Americans as the more accurate and significant portrayal of

historical events, one could argue that the oral literary tradition is “the truly important history” (Turner 1990:11).

2.2. African American written literature

The beginnings of written African American literature can be traced back to the 19th century, before the Civil War in the United States. The first examples of written literature in the African American communities were slave narratives, which represented the means by which “the African imagination made its transition from orality to literacy in North America” (Graham and Ward Jr. 2011:35). These autobiographical accounts often portrayed the horrors African American had to endure while they were forced into slavery (Prentice Hall 1999:IV). The slave narratives were, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. states, the attempts of African Americans to create a “communal voice, a collective tale rather than merely an individual’s autobiography” (Fernandes Corrêa 2011:71). The narratives usually followed a distinct pattern as the story consisted of the enslaved part of an African American person’s life – the conditions in which they were living and how they were treated by their Caucasian and Christian owners, an event or “crisis” and their escape to freedom to the North of the United States (Miniotaitė 2017:9-10). The slave narratives were ways in which the slaves were able to share their stories with the world. Some of the slaves knew how to read or write and were able to write their experiences down on their own. Those not fortunate enough to know how to write expressed their feelings to abolitionists who then published their tales for the public to read (Turner 1990:8-9).

The first known written African American slave narrative was titled *Bar Fights*. Written by Lucy Terry in 1746 but not published until 1855, the narrative described the author’s witnessing of many murders after an Indian attack on the place where she was enslaved (St.

Tammany Library). The first published literary piece written by an African American was a religious poem titled *An Evening Thought* written by Jupiter Hammon in 1761. Similarly to many African Americans in the United States at the time, Hammon was a slave. His owners, however, allowed Hammon to be independent by going to school and learning how to read and write, which became the foundation of his success later in life (Currie 2011:17-18). In 1789, the slave narrative titled *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* was published. The life story of the slave Olaudah Equiano became popular in both the United States and the United Kingdom, despite not being an important document in the abolitionist movement in the US (Golden 2015). By comparing the dreams of freedom and the reality of slavery and oppression, this particular slave narrative was an important literary work that shaped African American writing and American writing (Miniotaitė 2017:11). The first published African American book was written by Phillis Wheatley. Born in Africa and enslaved in Boston, Wheatley was given an excellent education for a slave, especially a woman slave. Her works mostly included poems that combined "Christian piety and Classical allusions" and her success in writing literary works influenced her to write a book that included her old and new poems (Graham and Ward Jr. 2011:58-59). Wheatley published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773 to prove that African Americans and Caucasians are equal in spirit (Andrews 2024).

The 19th-century African American literature was characterized by the demands of African Americans for Caucasians to become accountable for the horrors of slavery, as well as by the demands of putting an end to slavery. During the early 19th century, African American authors wrote essays, fiction, poetry and articles in hopes of ending the treatment they were exposed to (Andrews 2024). Similarly to the 18th century, slave narratives continued to be an outlet for African American slaves to share their stories. One of the most famous slave narratives was written by Frederick Douglass titled *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,*

an American Slave, Written by Himself. Published in 1845, the narrative tells the story of his life as an African American in the United States. Enslaved from birth, Douglass moved from one family to another but still managed to learn how to read by secretly tracing letters in old schoolbooks or paying poor white boys to tutor him. After physically fighting one of his owners, Douglass decided to fight for his freedom and teach other slaves how to read. He finally managed to escape to Massachusetts after being enslaved his whole life and he made money as a free man. His willingness to fight for freedom, as well as his love for literature and reading, influenced Douglass to write the narrative that became one of the most important documents in the abolitionist movement in the United States (Trent 2024). Another important female author was Harriet Jacobs. Her slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, was written under the pseudonym Linda Brent and published in 1861. The narrative was not originally published as one piece of literature but as a series in a New York newspaper (Golden 2015). In the narrative, Jacobs remembers the good childhood she experienced due to her father's trade business. But after her parents passed away, she and her siblings went through the same treatment as other African American slaves. Even after she escaped slavery and the sexual abuse she experienced, Jacobs did not leave for the North like other enslaved African Americans. Instead, she spent the next 7 years hidden in her grandmother's attic so she could be close to her children before they finally reunited and she bought their freedom. *Incidents* is an important narrative not only because of its depiction of the horrors of slavery but also because it puts more focus on women, their experience of enslavement, the different types of abuse that occur, and the effects abuse had on women (Miniotaitė 2017:13-14). In 1859, the first African American women's fiction came onto the literary scene as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper published *The Two Offers* - a short story about the troubles of middle-class women, and Harriet E. Wilson published *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* – an autobiography of a working-class Black woman living in the North (Andrews 2024).

After the end of the Civil War in 1865, African American authors "had less need to show the horrors of slavery and gave accounts of the narrator's adjustment to the new life of freedom" (Miniotaitė 2017:15). They used the newly gained freedom to educate themselves and their children because it was their right as American citizens. Still, there were few outlets for African American authors to publish their works as many publishing houses did not believe in the significance of their literature (Carson 2011:155-156). One author of this period who got the opportunity to be published was Paul Laurence Dunbar – the first African American author who supported himself entirely through his literary works (Prentice Hall 1999:118). In his poetry and fiction, Dunbar wrote about the different hardships African Americans had to face to succeed in a world dominated by white people. It was expected of African Americans to be and act happy even if they did not feel like it, as any negative emotion could still have unexpected results. As a response to those expectations, Dunbar wrote about the masks his community had to wear – a "mask that made it impossible to see the wearer clearly" (Currie 2011:41). His most famous works are his book of poetry *Oak and Ivy*, poems *We Wear the Mask* and *Sympathy,* and the novel *The Sport of the Gods* (Andrews 2024). Another important name in the late 19th century was Charles W. Chesnutt. He was the first African American fiction writer who gained attention and significance. During the first 5 years of the 20th century, Chesnutt published three novels and two collections of short stories in which he wrote about topics important to the African American community, such as racism within the race (Carson 2011:171-172). While other African American authors of the time tried to assimilate African Americans into society by portraying them as more similar to Caucasians, Miniotaitė argues that authors like Dunbar and Chesnutt only reinforced the stereotypes associated with the African American community. Their African American characters were depicted as slaves, savages, or exotic uncivilized individuals who did not question their inferiority to Caucasians. Miniotaitė states that "the character of the 'tragic mulatto' was the result of his wish to imitate whiteness, or 'to pass'; his

tragedy also lay in the fact that he could not completely fit in the white society or the black society and was equally scorned by both" (2017:17).

In the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, authors Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois used their position to write nonfiction to improve the status, educational rights, and lives of African American people in the United States (Currie 2011:46-47). Booker T. Washington was considered one of the most controversial race leaders because of his belief that African Americans could ask for the end of racism only after they proved themselves as equals to Caucasians (Miniotaitė 2017:15). His autobiography *Up From Slavery* tells his life story – how he was born into slavery but still managed to get an education and become the founding president of the Tuskegee Institute (Currie 2011:47). Contrary to Washington's opinions on the end of racism, W.E.B. DuBois believed that the only way social change can be achieved is through protest (Rudwick 2024) and that the change needs to happen immediately. He published a book of essays *The Souls of Black Folks* which served as a political document and as the depiction of the African American experience that everyone in their community could relate to (Currie 2011:49-50).

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s was considered "the flowering in literature and art of the New Negro Movement" (Andrews 2024)**.** The period was characterized by African Americans attempting to find an image for themselves – a model according to which they would represent themselves as American. Most African American writers of the time lived in Harlem where they met for literary gatherings and wrote works about the racial problems still prominent in the United States (Keller 1968:29-30). Still, the Harlem Renaissance was a period of contradiction. Despite the movement being cohesive, the writers had little in common and the literature of the time consisted of works of different literary styles and forms (Currie 2011:57). The work that epitomized the Harlem Renaissance was *The New Negro* – an anthology edited by Alain Locke that featured the works of many Harlem Renaissance authors

such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Rudolph Fisher (Andrews 2024). During this time, female African American writers became more frequent thanks to authors such as Frances E. W. Harper who "clearly influenced black female representation" (Sanders 2011:224). The female writers of the Harlem Renaissance – Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Helene Johnson, Nella Larsen, and others – insisted on equal attention to both men and women as the foundation of understanding the lives of African American people (Werner and Shannon 2011:244).

The 1960s African American literature developed under the influence of the many movements that were occurring in the United States, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist revolution. The main goal of literature at the time was to reflect the African American spirit of the Black Power movement and the culture of the Black community. During the decade, two seminal books were published – *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* and *The Black Aesthetic*. The books were a collection of works of many authors dedicated to creating literature for African American people; the authors included were Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Gwendolyn Brooks, and many more (Miniotaitė 2017:28-29). To artists of the Black Arts movement, literature was "a means of exhortation" (Andrews 2024). Most works of the 1960s were political, such as the works of Amiri Baraka. Despite moving within both black and white circles, formerly named LeRoi Jones decided to embrace his African American identity and produce works in hopes of motivating African American people for immediate change in their status (Currie 2011:78). On the other hand, authors such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin took a less political approach to literature as they attempted to "move away from racial focus in literature and try to stress the universal human experience, pointing out the fact that an artist can reveal, or at least attempt to reveal the experience of all people" (Miniotaitė 2017:29).

Following the trends of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the cultural and political African American movements throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the 1970s were dominated by African American female authors. Because of the contribution of female writers and the impact they had on African American women's consciousness, the 1970s were named "the Black women's literary renaissance" (Andrews 2024). The main theme of the 1970s African American literature was revisiting history, aesthetics and identity outside of the historically accepted 'black identity'. Instead, authors of the period shifted their focus to "intraracial differences (of class, gender and sexuality)" (Miniotaitė 2017:35). Currie, however, states that there was not a single characteristic that could encompass the literature of the decade (2011:83). The most prominent female writers of the time –Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison – made the biggest impact on modern African American literature through their fiction and poetry. Morrison's novels on the perception of African American women, their struggles and oppression in a white-dominated society, and Walker's and Angelou's poetic discourse regarding abuse, incest, and class differences in black communities turned into the literary basis of the literature coming in the following centuries (Andrews 2024). The three authors created a path for other African American female writers to explore the themes of identity, friendship, heritage, and womanhood in the African American community (Miniotaitė 2017:42).

A characteristic of African American literature, no matter the century in which it is written, is the fact that they "have taken the experiences of racism, challenge, and triumph, and created literature that reveals the human spirit" (Prentice Hall 1999:IV). All African American authors used their influence and position to share their own stories or stories based on the general African American experience with society. The female authors who made the biggest impact on modern African American society are Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou. Through their stories dealing with class and gender differences, search for identity, womanhood, domestic abuse, and relationships, these two authors realistically portrayed the experience of

African American women. With their literary opus spanning from novels, poetry, and essays, both Morrison and Angelou created works that had a great influence on African American women and the development of their identity.

3. Toni Morrison – upbringing and early life

Toni Morrison was an American writer, essayist, book editor, and professor whose works about African American history and experience had a great influence on the development of African American literature. Her literary opus had a strong impact on the perception of African Americans, their lives, and culture, in the United States, as well as worldwide. By bringing to attention the African American experience from within the community, Morrison created a legacy highlighting the lives of African Americans, especially African American women.

Morrison was born on February 18 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, as Chloe Ardelia Wofford. She was the second of four children to parents George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford. Two generations of Morrison's family migrated throughout the United States before her birth in Lorain – her grandparents, John Solomon Willis, and Ardelia Willis, moved from Alabama to Kentucky with their twelve children. During that time, Morisson's grandfather taught himself and his sister how to read. John Solomon lost land to white men and was forced to work as a sharecropper on the land he lost. Morrison's parents, George and Ramah, moved from Georgia to Ohio as they were seeking security and refuge due to the Jim Crow segregation in the South. George Wofford was a ship-welder who worked several jobs to secure his working-class, African American family's existence. Morrison's upbringing took place in Lorain, a town located 25 miles away from Cleveland, in a semi-integrated community consisting of European immigrants and a smaller group of African Americans who moved from the South (Jimoh 2002:2-3). Her parents instilled in young Morrison a love for music, literature, and folklore by retelling traditional Afro-American stories and singing traditional Afro-American songs (Matas 2021:17). George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford's storytelling abilities, as well as their belief in the mystical and spiritual, had a great influence on Morrison and her sense of the importance of African American culture and history (Jimoh 2002:4). Despite growing up within

an African American community, Morrison soon encountered racism. When she was two years old, the apartment's owner set her family home on fire because they could not afford the rent (Biography: Toni Morrison). The incident did not make Morrison feel inferior later in life compared to her schoolmates, as she stated that she was the only African American girl in her class and the only child who knew how to read (Bibliography.com).

At the age of 12, Chloe Ardelia Wofford decided to convert to Roman Catholicism. As a part of the conversion, she used 'Anthony' as her baptismal name. The name change later led to the creation of her nickname which she used for the rest of her life – Toni (Matas 2021:17). During her elementary and high school education, Morrison focused on her studies, which included studying Latin and reading books of European literature (Biography.com). She became part of the debate team, as well as the yearbook staff at her school. She later became a secretary for the head librarian at her hometown library, Lorain Public Library (Biography: Toni Morrison). In 1949, Morrison graduated high school at the top of her class and decided to move to Washington, D.C. to study at Howard University, a "historically black institution". While studying at Howard University, Morrison joined the Howard University Players, the university's theatrical group. While traveling with the group throughout the South, she witnessed the segregation happening in the United States and how people were being divided based on the color of their skin (Biography.com). Her enrollment at Howard University allowed her to meet other artists, writers, and activists (Biography: Toni Morrison), as well as several African American academics and intellectuals who influenced her literary work (Matas 2021:17). Morrison graduated with a bachelor's degree in English from Howard University in 1953, after which she continued her education at Cornell University where she completed her master's degree in 1955 with her thesis on the topic "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated" (Jimoh 2002:5).

3.1. Teaching career and literary success

After finishing her studies, Morrison decided to pursue a career as a teacher. Her first teaching job was at Texas Southern University, where she was employed as an English instructor (Jimoh 2002:6). Two years later, in 1957, Morrison returned to her alma mater to continue her career, this time as a professor. She remained in this job position for the next 7 years (Biography: Toni Morrison). During her time at Howard University, Morrison met a Jamaican architect named Harold Morrison, who she married in 1958. After six years of marriage and two children, Harold and Toni separated in 1964 (Matas 2021:17). The time after her divorce was the period Morrison began writing as a way of coping with her loneliness (Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu 2003:viii). While teaching at Howard University, Morrison became part of a small writer's group. All participants were obliged to write short literary pieces and present them to the rest of the group. Morrison's short story about a black girl who longed to have blue eyes later became her door to literary success (Jimoh 2002:6).

In 1964, Morrison began working as an editor for the textbook subsidiary of Random House in Syracuse, New York (Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu 2003:viii). After working in that position for a few years, she was promoted to a new job position within the same company. She moved to New York to continue working for Random House as the first female African American senior editor (Matas 2021:17-18). In this job position, Morrison had the opportunity to edit the works of African American authors such as Henry Dumas, Leon Forrest, June Jordan, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, and many others (Jimoh 2002:7-8). One of the most important books Morrison edited was *The Black Book*. Published in 1970, *The Black Book* is an anthology of photographs, essays, and other documents depicting the lives of African Americans in the United States from the times of slavery to the 1920s (Matas 2021:18). While still employed as a senior editor at Random House, she started teaching at the State University of New York at Purchase. From then on, Morrison began teaching and holding lectures at many other

universities and colleges, such as Harvard, Yale, Trinity College Cambridge, and Princeton, Bard, among others (Jimoh 2002:8).

Throughout the 1960s, Morrison decided to develop further the short story she wrote for her university's small writers group. As a result of her efforts, her first novel titled *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. The novel follows the story of a young African American girl, Pecola Breedlove, whose desire is to have beautiful blue eyes (Bracken 2024). At the time of the publication of the novel Morrison was 39 years old. The novel received positive reviews and comments from the public, which fueled Morrison's desire to continue writing (Matas 2021:19). *The Bluest Eye* was the beginning of Morrison's literary career during which she wrote 11 novels. Three years after the publication of her debut novel, in 1973, Morrison published her second novel, *Sula*. The novel follows the story of two African American women and their friendship within the Black community (Britannica). Despite the novel receiving mixed reviews, Morrison became a prominent figure in the literary circles of the time and received the National Book Award nomination in 1975 (Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu 2003:ix). Her works became regularly published in the *New York Times Magazine* and *New York Times Book Review*, as well as other newspapers, magazines, and journals (Jimoh 2002:9). In 1977, Morrison published her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, which deals with the story of a Midwestern inhabitant who searches for his family roots. Her third novel made Morrison a household name and received the National Book Critics Circle Award. The success *Song of Solomon* experienced encouraged Morrison to quit her career at Random House as a publisher and become a full-time writer (Biography: Toni Morrison). In 1980, Morrison's success continued as she was appointed to the National Council on the Arts (Biography.com). Her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, is the first novel written by Morrison that deals with modern subjects and issues. Published in 1981, *Tar Baby* is a novel about the relationship between Jadine, an African American model, and Son, a poor African American man (Matas 2021:19). Compared to her

previous works, this novel received mixed reactions from the critics and the public (Biography.com). In 1986, Morrison's first play *Dreaming Emmett* was performed at the University of Albany. The storyline of the play follows Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy white men murdered in 1955 because of his alleged insult to a white woman (Matas 2021:20).

While researching materials for *The Black Book*, Morrison found the story of Margaret Garner, an African American runaway slave who killed her daughter. The murder was Margaret's attempt to prevent history from repeating itself – she did not want her daughter to become a slave like herself (Matas 2021:19). The story of Margaret became the foundation for one of Morrison's most famous novels – *Beloved*. Published in 1987 and set in the 19th century, *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, an enslaved African American woman who decides to run away from her enslavers with her daughter. Upon her recapture, Sethe murders her infant daughter to save her from slavery. For the next 18 years, Sethe and her family are tortured by the presence of the ghost of the daughter who, upon her death, was named Beloved (Britannica). Morrison's fifth novel became an instant success and, as a result of its worldwide recognition, her career experienced a great upswing. One year after the publication, in 1988, Morrison received the Pulitzer Prize in Literature for *Beloved* (Elizabeth AnnBeaulieu 2003:ix). *Beloved* is the first book in the *Beloved Trilogy* which consists of Morrison's most well-known novel and the two novels that followed its publication – *Jazz* and *Paradise*. Published in 1992, Morrison's sixth novel *Jazz* tells the story of a love triangle during the Harlem Renaissance, the most fruitful period of African American literature (Matas 2021:20). The highlight of Morrison's literary career happened in 1993 when she received the Nobel Prize in Literature. She was the first African American woman, as well as the eighth woman ever, to receive this prize. According to Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, The Swedish Academy "described her as a writer who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American

reality" (2003:ix) Three years after the reception of the Nobel Prize, Morrison was honored with the National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters (Biography: Toni Morrison). The last book of the *Beloved Trilogy* and Morrison's seventh novel, *Paradise*, was published in 1997. The novel's narrative is centered in Ruby, a fictional African American utopian town in the state of Oklahoma (Britannica).

In 2003, Morrison published her eighth novel *Love*. The novel tells the story of a wealthy entrepreneur, his community life and his love life, from two different time perspectives – the past and the present (Biography.com). Her ninth novel, *A Mercy*, published in 2008, is set in 1682. The narrative focuses on two groups of people – the European newcomers who came to the United States and the African Americans who fought for their freedom and emancipation from slavery in the territory of colonized Virginia. 4 years later, in 2012, Morrison published her tenth novel *Home* in which she details the life of an African American war veteran who, after the Korean War, returns home and tries to save his sister from a white doctor and his experiments. Her eleventh and final novel is *God Help The Child*. In the novel published in 2015, Morrison tells the story of Bride, a young African American woman whose life revolves around her unusually dark skin – a characteristic that makes her mother despise her (Matas 2021:21).

3.2. Other literary works, accomplishments and death

Despite being most famous for the novels, Morrison's opus consists of other literary works that gained popularity during her rise as an author. During her career as a writer and publisher, Morrison published many essays on topics related to African Americans, their communities, and life experiences. Her works include literary criticism such as *Playing In the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, as well as two essay collections – *Birth of a*

Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case and *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu 2003:ix). Many of her essays appeared in magazines and journals, such as "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" in *Michigan Quarterly Review* and "What The Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib" in *New York Times Magazine* (Jimoh 2002:9). In 2009, Morrison was an editor of *Burn This Book*, a collection of essays that discuss censorship and the power the written word holds. The collection was published after one of her novels was banned in one high school in Michigan (Biography.com). Moving away from writing historical and fictional novels and critical essays, Morrison and her son Slade cowrote many children's books, such as *The Book of Mean People* published in 2002, and *Please, Louise* in 2014 (Britannica).

In 1998, Morrison's most famous novel *Beloved* was turned into a movie. Directed by Jonathan Demme, the leading role of Sethe was played by Oprah Winfrey, Paul D was played by Danny Glover and the role of Beloved was given to Thandie Newton (Matas 2021:20-21). The storyline of *Beloved* was revisited in 2005 when Morrison wrote the libretto for the opera *Margaret Garner* (Britannica).

Morrison's contribution to the literary scene earned her an Honorary Doctorate Degree from the University of Oxford and her nomination as a Living Legend by the Library of Congress (Biography: Toni Morrison). She was named an officer of the French Legion of Honor in 2010 (Britannica). In 2012, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama. Four years later, in 2016, she received the Pen/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction (Biography.com). In 2019, director Timothy Greenfield-Sanders released *Toni Morrison – The Pieces I Am* – a documentary about the life and work of the author.

2 months after the release of the documentary, on August 5, 2019, Toni Morrison passed away from complications of pneumonia in New York (Biography: Toni Morrison).

4. *The Bluest Eye* - the analysis of the novel

Toni Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. The novel's storyline centers around Pecola Breedlove and her family living in Morrison's hometown Lorain, Ohio, during the 1940s (Bracken 2024). Pecola is an adolescent African American girl "who is described as impoverished, black and ugly" (Arun 2024:2). Because of the pressures and beauty standards of the predominantly white American society in which she lives, the only wish Pecola has is to have blue eyes that will help her find her place in the world.

The novel, told from a third-person perspective, begins with the words "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (Morrison 2004:11). The narrator of the majority of the novel, 9-year-old Claudia MacTeer, gives insight into Pecola Breedlove's complicated family situation in the first two sentences. In the storyline of the novel, Pecola is firstly living with the MacTeer's – a foster family who took her in after her father burned her house down. Claudia and her younger sister Frieda soon befriend Pecola and enjoy the few days that follow her arrival. Pecola's time with the MacTeer family is short as she returns to her home, her parents, and her brother (Bracken 2024). Readers quickly learn that Pecola grew up in an unstable and troubled environment – her entire life she is surrounded by her runaway brother Sam, neglectful mother Pauline, and abusive and alcoholic father Cholly. Her parents' frequent verbal arguments often lead to physical altercations, contributing to Pecola's pessimistic outlook on life (Arun 2024:2). Many conflicts in the Breedlove family arise from personal issues each character has regarding their race. Growing up in poor economic and social conditions, especially as people of color, both Pauline and Cholly developed unhealthy relationships with themselves and the people close to them, including their two children. The biggest influence on Pecola's self-esteem is her mother's opinion of her. Instead of showing her

daughter love, Pauline despises Pecola because of her race and directs all her love toward the white girls of the family she works for. This emotional betrayal leads Pecola into an even deeper spiral of self-hatred and the desire for blue eyes (Matas 2021:31).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison intertwines the stories of two characters whose lives are tragically similar yet different – Pecola's and Claudia's. Both girls – young, African American, and living in poverty in a white-dominated society – had the predisposition to go down the same paths in their lives. Cormier-Hamilton states how, in this novel, Morrison focused not only on the race and class of the main characters as the driving force for the narrative, "but the theory of naturalism as well: the idea that one's social and physical environment can drastically affect one's nature and potential for surviving and succeeding in this world" (1944:109). The most important factor contributing to the development of both Pecola and Claudia is their closest environment – their family. Donelli and Matas see the influence of family in the novel as a means to draw parallels between Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the tragic destiny of young Pecola. According to Bronfenbrenner, the most important aspects of a child's development are nature and nurture, or rather the child itself and how his or her environment combined with this nature shapes him into a functional being. The environment influences the child on a different scale, based on the proximity of each system – the close surroundings such as a family have a direct influence, while other more distant, like laws and customs, have a more indirect influence on the child's psychological growth (Crawford 2020:1). The child's closest systems – the micro and mesosystems – are the connections by which a child creates its own identity and partakes in the creation of a "collective, family identity" (Donelli and Matas 2021:76). In that sense, the environment in which the child grows up is one of the key elements in the creation of its identity, attitudes, and resilience to harmful situations. Claudia's family, despite living in unfavorable conditions, managed to provide enough safety and support for Claudia to escape a destiny similar to Pecola's. Claudia always considered her mother and father

available and ready to help, even though their parenting methods were sometimes harsh – they raised their daughters combining both authority and love. Their parenting also led to Claudia rejecting the socially accepted beauty standards, as she despised the idea of whiteness equating beauty: “I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blueeyed, yellow-haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. ‘Here,’ they said, ‘this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it.’ (…) I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable” (Morrison 2004:21). On the other hand, the instability of the Breedlove family led Pecola down a road of self-hatred and self-destruction as she was never given the support to become comfortable with herself. The main culprits are her parents who by listening to the internalized racist ideas and beliefs of the white societal majority cannot accept even themselves, let alone their young daughter. Furman summarized this idea by stating that “ironically named since they breed not love but violence and misery, Cholly and Pauline eventually destroy their daughter, whose victimization is a bold symbol of their own despair and frustration” (1999:186). The beginning of Pecola’s downfall was the moment she was born into the Breedlove family – a family so heavily influenced by the standards of their environment that they cannot be a safe and positive space for a child to develop. Without any positive role models or adults on her side, Pecola did not stand a chance of becoming confident and secure in her own identity.

Throughout the novel, the difference in the treatment of Caucasians and African Americans is palpable. Accurately mimicking real-life history, the storyline portrays how African Americans are always perceived as inferior or lacking in comparison to their Caucasian neighbors. As Arslan states: “The society in the novel internalized a standard of beauty, which means that whiteness is beautiful and blackness is ugly” (2023:2). Pecola experiences this

difference when trying to buy candy from a white owner's store, in whose eyes Pecola sees the repulse African American people provoke in him: “She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (Morrison 2004:42). Instead of rejecting the societal idea and prejudice, the African American characters accept their treatment. They internalize the hatred of Caucasian people and redirect it toward themselves and their loved ones. The way Pecola’s parents treat her stems from their past experiences. Cholly did not have a stable family as he was abandoned as a baby. Despite experiencing one disappointment after another since birth, the most important and tragic moment of Cholly’s life was his first sexual experience. During the experience, two white men forced Cholly and the girl he was with to continue with their act while they were watching them, which led to Cholly’s twisted views on love (Khan and Mishra 2017:2-3). The best example of internalized racism in the novel is Pauline who, since childhood, had troubles of her own, as she always felt unattractive because of her physical features: “Slight as it was, this deformity explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; why no one ever remarked on her food preferences—no saving of the wing or neck for her—no cooking of the peas in a separate pot without rice because she did not like rice; why nobody teased her; why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness

she blamed on her foot" (Morrison 2004:86-87). In an attempt to combat her loneliness, Pauline spends hours at the cinema admiring the beautiful white actors and actresses (Arun 2024:2) and her dislike of herself and her features leads to her dislike of her daughter. But the entire Breedlove family built their lives on the false perception of their worth – they never considered themselves attractive or successful and they did not strive to achieve anything that white people were achieving. Even their living conditions were determined by the Western perception of African Americans: "The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (Morrison 2004:34). With her family disrespecting itself in the same manner the white people disrespect the African American community, Pecola has no other choice but the internalize the disrespect and point it toward herself. Even if she wants to break the cycle of self-hatred, she is unable to do so while living with her family. Because of the parents' perception of unattractiveness that both Pecola and her brother inherit, and the low self-confidence it produces, Pecola feels as if she cannot escape the Breedlove family and its curse: "As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them" (Morrison 2004:39). Consciously or not, Cholly's and Pauline's feelings of not fitting into the beauty standards have been denying Pecola a chance at happiness since birth.

Even though the novel shows the difference between people of different races, it focuses more on the difference in perception of people of color within the same community, in this case the African American. There are many situations in the novel where African American characters judge or belittle other African Americans based on the color of their skin and their looks. This change in attitude and behavior stems from the imposed attitudes of the Caucasian majority which is the biggest influence on any minority group, such as the African Americans. In the novel, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola consider themselves less beautiful or valuable when

compared to another girl named Maureen. Maureen is not Caucasian – she is African American just like the three girls. The main difference is, however, the tone of their skin. Pecola and the MacTeer sisters have a deeper skin tone than Maureen, which makes them perceive her as better and more attractive than them. Maureen is a light-skinned African American girl who comes from a wealthy family and "considers herself and other people 'of color' to be above black people" (Khan and Mishra 2017:4). Maureen's character is only one of many characters that portray internalized racism and the effects it has on the members of the community. The group of boys that the MacTeer sisters and Pecola encounter after school have no problem insulting Pecola because of her deep black skin, although they are African American as well: "They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit" (Morrison 54). Pecola, a teenage black girl, could be considered one of the most fragile members of society. Instead of protecting her and helping her accept herself, her own community is throwing rocks at her for being just like them. Without adequate family support, and with no other black person on her side other than two girls her age, Pecola was left to her own devices to fend for herself and her existence. And when, at the end of the novel, Pecola is consumed by madness, the community once again takes a step back and abandons her. In her internal world, Pecola is trying to convince herself that all the changes around her are the result

of her new eyes, and not of her father raping her or the bizarre behavior that followed (Khan and Mishra 2017:2). It would be unfair to propose that Pecola's outburst was the result of her insecurities when she is the personification of her own community – the community should be equally responsible for her downfall. As Furman states: "responsibility must be shared by blacks who assuage their own insults from society by oppressing those like Pecola who are vulnerable" (1999:185).

With the evident difference between white and black people, how they are perceived and treated, and how their families shape their behavior and attitudes, it is not strange that Pecola yearned for blue eyes and the acceptance that comes with such a typically Caucasian feature. This need for recognition is understandable since Western society and literature have always focused more on outward, physical beauty as a valid representation of one's inner value (Cormier-Hamilton 1994:115). Pecola is a character heavily influenced by her environment, which includes Western values and ideas of beauty and attractiveness. The rape she experiences makes Pecola want blue eyes even more than she did before. Desperate to fulfill her wish, she seeks help from Soaphead, a conman who interprets dreams and performs miracles for the members of the local African American community. He tricks Pecola into giving a piece of poisoned meat to the dog by telling her if the dog acts strange, she will have blue eyes the next day. As the dog dies from the meat, Pecola is convinced that she will wake up the next morning with blue eyes (Bracken 2024). In her mind, the change in her eye color would solve the problems she had and it would change the Breedlove family dynamic – "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of

those pretty eyes.'" (Morrison 2004:40). Pecola strives to change her looks to appear more Caucasian because "whiteness is associated with value, wealth, and cleanliness; however, blackness is associated with worthlessness, poverty, and dirtiness" (Arslan 2023:2). Pecola is constantly trying to lose herself, and her African American looks and heritage, in hopes of becoming more similar to the Western standards of beauty and attractiveness. In her attempts to do so, she obsesses over everything related to the white ideal, such as blue eyes, Mary Jane candy, or a cup with the face of Shirley Temple. In comparison to her friend Claudia, Pecola has no "shield of self-love to combat negative influences from black and white society" (Cormier-Hamilton 1994:121), which only deepens her spiral into insanity. Claudia is a character much stronger than Pecola – she critically approaches the beauty standards imposed by the majority and she rejects their negative perception of African Americans. Pecola, on the other hand, lacks those skills and is easily pulled under the influence of the appreciation of being beautiful and white.

5. *God Help the Child* - the analysis of the novel

God Help the Child is Toni Morrison's last novel published in 2015. In this novel, Morrison explores the life and struggles of Bride – a young, beautiful, and wealthy African American woman whose life, despite her current success, is marked by a childhood full of abuse and racism (Matas 2021:48). After the disappearance of her boyfriend, Bride's history starts to unravel and the readers are presented with the story of her traumatic upbringing and questionable life choices that led her to her current position ("God Help the Child" a Mature Morrison Child | Arts | The Harvard Crimson).

The story is told from multiple perspectives, each presented by the most important characters in the novel – Bride, her mother Sweetness, her best friend Brooklyn, and the teacher from her elementary school Sofia – who, by sharing details about Bride's life, help create the complete picture of her persona. In this novel, Morrison presents a protagonist completely different from Pecola Breedlove. Bride is a strong, confident, and independent African American female entrepreneur who can achieve anything she imagines and is admired because of her skin color (Matas 2021:48). Despite Bride's physical, emotional, and financial advantages, she and Pecola still share many similarities. Both protagonists have unstable relationships with their parents, or more precisely – both Pecola's and Bride's mothers despise them because of their skin color. The first chapter is narrated by Sweetness, in which she describes the moments after Bride's birth and her feelings towards her baby. Openly scared and disgusted by her newborn daughter, Sweetness dedicates her life to teaching Bride how to stay out of white people's way and how to avoid trouble. Morrison writes how Sweetness reacted the first time she saw her newborn daughter: "It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I'm lightskinned, with good hair, what we call

high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I can think of yet her hair don't go with the skin. It's different— straight but curly like those naked tribes in Australia" (Morrison 2015:11). This reaction is the result of the Western influence on the African American minority. Sweetness' life has been easy because of the lightness of her skin which wouldn't necessarily be associated with being black. Bride, however, was born with a much darker skin tone than both her parents. Being accustomed to the relaxed lifestyle her skin tone has made possible, Sweetness "deprives her only daughter of affection in order to preserve her privileged position, and thus, abide by the dominant rule of class solidarity and racial purity" (Keita 2018:45). Her daughter's skin tone causes Sweetness to emotionally and physically distance herself from Bride – she never hugged her, held her hand, or showed her any sign of love and affection. In her way, Sweetness tries to shelter Bride from the hurt African American women are exposed to in everyday life: "Things got better but I still had to be careful. Very careful in how I raised her. I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble. I don't care how many times she changes her name. Her color is a cross she will always carry" (Morrison 2015:13). Her ways of raising Bride are heavily influenced by the fears African Americans have felt since they first came to the United States and were forced into slavery. The African American past of racism and slavery is used as an excuse for Sweetness to not take care of her dark-skinned daughter, as blackness is associated with the lowest level of human existence (Keita 2018:47). By distancing herself from her daughter, Sweetness indirectly forced Bride into doing anything she thought would make her mother love her. That reservation led Bride to falsely testify against an elementary school teacher just so her mother would hold her hand and love her: "'I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her but she didn't do any of that. (…) 'You lied? What the hell for?' 'So my mother would hold my hand!' 'What?' 'And look at me with proud eyes, for once.'" (Morrison 2015:107). The centuries-old weight

of stereotypical inferiority caused by one's skin color was carried on the shoulders of an innocent girl in search of maternal love and acceptance. And when given the opportunity, Bride decides to give herself a chance at her mother finally loving her.

There was no room for love and affection in Sweetness's parenting methods, and she often mistreated Bride and denied her any parental warmth. From early childhood, Bride yearned for any type of contact from her mother, even if it was physical abuse (Walker 2015). The painful and reserved upbringing left Bride longing for her mother's affection. In her early childhood, Bride was painfully aware of her mother's resignation but still yearned for every interaction with her, no matter the nature of it: "I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch" (Morrison 2015:28). The lack of love and affection experienced from her birth led to Bride developing an unhealthy attitude toward love and relationships. The readers learn that Bride's partner Booker left her, which marks the beginning of her emotional and physical deterioration. After their parting, Bride turned to partying and substance abuse to cope with the loss of the only person in her life who showed her love. Bride does not view relationships as something intimate shared between two people who love each other, but rather as a way of men using her because she is beautiful and successful. At one point in the novel, Bride says: "All my boyfriends were typecast: would-be actors, rappers, professional athletes, players waiting for my crotch or my paycheck like an allowance; others, already having made it, treating me like a medal, a shiny quiet testimony to their prowess. Not one of them giving, helpful—none interested in what I thought, just what I looked like. Joking or baby-talking me through what I believed was serious conversation before they found more ego props elsewhere" (Morrison 2015:31). From Bride's words, it is obvious that she believes men are only interested in her physically and financially. At the same time, she shines a light on how she perceives most men, as she stereotypically paints every man to be

the same – they only want a woman to show her off, not to love her. The lack of love in her most formative childhood years left Bride believing that true love does not exist and that people will only use her for her body or to make themselves seem better. Her relationship with Booker is the first real connection she experiences and after their break up "she has become a human wreck, a degraded person whose sense of self and morality has been upside down" (Keita 2018:48). The only emotionally stable relationship Bride had ended with Booker saying that she is not the woman he wants. These words propel Bride into a state of uncertainty regarding herself, her looks, and her identity.

Throughout the novel, Bride's past and present mix as the storyline of Sofia is introduced. Sofia was an elementary teacher who worked in Bride's school and was sentenced to prison for child molestation after Bride testified against her. Bride tries to make amends after Sofia's release from prison, but the former teacher beats Bride to the ground. During her recovery, Bride notices that her body has gone through some bodily changes, such as the holes of her ear piercings being closed. This can be interpreted as another consequence of Sweetness' hard parenting, as these changes represent Bride's undeveloped identity. Presenting herself as an attractive African American woman that everyone desires, it soon becomes clear that Bride is putting on a façade of confidence and knowing who she is. There are many instances throughout the novel in which Bride compliments herself and her self-confidence is almost palpable to the reader. At the same time, the reader is introduced to numerous situations in Bride's life that shaped her into the person she is today. Most of these situations are racist that, in return, made Bride seemingly more satisfied with herself as she grew older: "I was six years old and had never heard the words 'nigger' or 'cunt' before, but the hate and revulsion in them didn't need definition. Just like later in school when other curses—with mysterious definitions but clear meanings—were hissed or shouted at me. Coon. Topsy. Clinkertop. Sambo. Ooga booga. Ape sounds and scratching of the sides, imitating zoo monkeys. One day a girl and three boys heaped

a bunch of bananas on my desk and did their monkey imitations. They treated me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper. I didn't complain to the teacher for the same reason Sweetness cautioned me about Mr. Leigh—I might get suspended or even expelled. So I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins, with no antibiotic available. Which, actually, was a good thing now I think of it, because I built up immunity so tough that not being a 'nigger girl' was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn't need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a deathlike pallor. And I don't need silicon in my butt. I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it. I have to say, forcing those tormentors—the real ones and others like them—to drool with envy when they see me is more than payback. It's glory" (Morrison 2015:44). At first glance, Bride's self-confidence seems indestructible, but the storyline of the novel shows that the only thing about her she deems valuable is her looks. When she experiences heartbreak, her traumatic childhood resurfaces and she begins regressing to a young version of herself and feeling as if she is "melting away" (Morrison 2015:14). Bride's transformation is completely psychological as no one around her can witness the changes she is experiencing. The changes are at first small, but as Bride is trying harder to find Booker and her world is seemingly burning down, these changes become bigger and turn her into a girl devoid of signs of maturity. Without her partner to love or mother to comfort her, Bride is once again put into the position she was in when she was young and unloved by everyone around her. But by resolving the issues from her past and admitting her wrongdoings, Bride is able to transform back into the adult version of herself. When stripped of the years of guilt, shame, and feelings of unwantedness, Bride can know, love and accept herself.

6. Maya Angelou – upbringing and early life

Maya Angelou was an African American author, poet, activist, singer, and dancer whose autobiographical writing gave a great insight into the minds and lives of young African American women growing up in different communities. Dabbling in many creative and artistic careers such as a songwriter and playwright, stage and screen producer, director, and performer, Angelou experienced many situations that shaped her life and literary work. Her novels and poetry reflect the struggles and hardships of a young African American woman trying to find her place in a white-dominated world.

Maya Angelou, also known by her birth name Marguerite Ann Johnson, was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri (West 2002:12). Her family consisted of four members. Her father, Bailey Johnson Sr., worked as a doorman and her mother Vivian Baxter Johnson was a card dealer working in a local gambling parlor. Her parents had two children - Marguerite's brother Jonathan who was a year older than her and Marguerite herself. The relationship between Marguerite and Bailey was a very close one, and Bailey's nickname for his sister – "my-a-sister" – became Angelou's nickname and later legal name Maya. The tumultuous marriage between her parents soon resulted in a divorce and both Marguerite, age 3, and her brother, age 4, left St. Louis to live with their paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. Their grandmother, Annie Henderson, was the owner of a general store. At the back of that store lived Marguerite, Bailey, their grandmother and their disabled uncle. Both Marguerite and her brother often helped their grandmother with the store (Kirkpatrick 2014:2-3).

When she briefly returned to her mother's home at the age of 7, Marguerite became a victim of rape at the hand of her mother's boyfriend. After speaking up about the matter, and the boyfriend being killed upon his release from jail, Marguerite became mute for approximately six years (Spring 2017). The incident resulted in Marguerite and Bailey returning to live with

their grandmother in Stamps for the next few years. In the following years, Marguerite dedicated her time in silence to reading and writing poetry. She read the works of William Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe, as well as the works of some of the most famous Harlem Renaissance authors – W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson (West 2002:12). Mrs. Flowers, an influential woman in Stamps' African American community, recognized Marguerite's brightness and passion for reading. Through her encouragement to read every book in the library and to speak the words she read, Marguerite overcame her muteness and began to use her voice again (Kirkpatrick 2014:3-4). After graduating with honors from Lafayette County Training School in Arkansas in 1940, Marguerite and her brother were sent to live with their mother in San Francisco. The next year, in 1941, she started attending George Washington High School in California, where she took drama and dance courses at the California Labor School (Spring 2017). Life in California with her mother quickly became too much for Marguerite, who decided to run away so she could live with her father and his girlfriend in their trailer (Burt 1998:2). As living with her father was not as she imagined, she ran away from his trailer and lived the next month in a junkyard surrounded by other homeless children before returning to her mother's home (West 2002:12). Burt states how "Angelou's dysfunctional childhood spent moving back and forth between her mother and grandmother caused her to struggle with maturity. She became determined to prove she was a woman and began to rush toward maturity" (1998:2). As a result, Marguerite became pregnant with a local boy after forcing him to be with her. She gave birth to her son, Clyde, a few days after her high school graduation (Kirkpatrick 2014:4).

As a teenage mother, Marguerite lived a life of poverty. Her financial situation made her work many jobs – she worked as a streetcar conductor, a dancer, a singer, and an actress (Kirkpatrick 2014:4). Marguerite also worked illegal jobs, such as a prostitute or a bordello madam (West 2002:12). In 1949, she married an electrician named Tosh Angelos. Despite their

marriage ending three years later, Marguerite kept his last name and became Maya Angelou (Spring 2017). After the divorce, she secured scholarships to study dance with Martha Graham and Pearl Primus. At that period of her life, Angelou became part of the *Porgy and Bess* nation tour sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. During that time she visited Italy, Yugoslavia, France, and Egypt (West 2002:13), and learned to speak Spanish, French, English, Italian and Arabic fluently (Kirkpatrick 2014:4).

6.1. Literary career and novels

In the 1950s, Angelou became part of the Harlem Writer's Guild and focused on her writing. She started writing poetry, prose, songs, screenplays, and short stories (Kirkpatrick 2014:4). During the Civil Rights Movement, Angelou became an active participant and was the northern coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Spring 2017). In the early years of the 1960s, Angelou moved to Egypt to work briefly as an editor for *The Arab Observer*, after which she and her son relocated to Ghana. She worked as an editor and a dance and drama teacher at the University of Ghana, Institute of African Studies in Legon, Accra. Her life in Ghana was very productive, as she worked as an administrative assistant at the University of Ghana, for the Ghanian Broadcasting Company and wrote articles for the magazines *Ghanian Times* and *African Review* (West 2002:13). Her stay in Africa familiarized her with her African heritage and its culture (Kirkpatrick 2014:4). During her time in Ghana, she felt finally at home (Burt 1998:4). Becoming acquainted with important figures of the Civil Rights Movement, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, Angelou decided to move back to the United States in hopes of working alongside Malcolm X in the fight against discrimination and racial segregation. At the beginning of their work together, Malcolm X was assassinated. After the

assassination of another important activist figure, Martin Luther King Jr., Angelou began writing her first autobiography at the age of 42 (Kirkpatrick 2014:4-5).

Angelou's novels are autobiographical and tell the story of her turbulent upbringing and life as an African American woman in the 20th century. As Kirkpatrick states, "All of the autobiographical works have been produced as adult looking through the eyes of the child and young woman who was evolving. The work is a glimpse into the experiences of a black, female individual who has had to find an identity through the experiences lived" (2014:5). Angelou wrote seven autobiographical novels based on her life. Her first novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was published in 1969 and tells the story of the earliest years of Angelou's life. The novel follows Angelou's journey to Arkansas at the age of 3, the racial discrimination she had to face in the South and her and her brother's life in St. Louis with their mother. As an autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* depicts descriptions of Angelou's rape at the age of 8, her academic achievements, the downfall of her nuclear family, and her becoming a mother at the age of 16 (Wightman and Bauer 2024). Her second novel, *Gather Together in My Name* published in 1974, focuses on Angelou's late teenage years. Following Angelou from the ages of 17 to 19, the novel centers around her struggles as a young single mother trying to fend for herself and her son (Kirkpatrick 2014:6). At that time, she was working as a Creole cook, a tap dancer, a madam, a prostitute, and a chauffeur (Burt 1998:2). Angelou's third autobiographical novel, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* was published in 1976. Chronologically moving throughout her life, the third novel focuses on the years Angelou spent working on the musical *Porgy and Bess* and on their European tour (Kirkpatrick 2014:6), as well as the impact the tour had on her mental health as she felt guilt for leaving her son behind (Burt 1998:3).

The following years were the most productive period of Angelou's writing. In 1981, her fourth novel *The Heart of a Woman* was published. The fourth installation in Angelou's

autobiographical series portrays her growth as an artist and as a person (Kirkpatrick 2014:6) as she became more involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and its fight against racism, discrimination, and racial oppression (Burt 1998:3). In the next few years, Angelou published books one after another. In 1983 she published a poetry collection titled *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?*, in 1986 *Poems: Maya Angelou* and in 1987 *Now Sheba Sings the Song*, a poetry book. In 1986, Angelou published her fifth novel titled *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (West 2002:14) in which she tells the story of her life in Ghana and her connection to her African roots and heritage (Kirkpatrick 2014:6). Her sixth autobiographical novel was published in 2002. Titled *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, the novel tells the story of the years after her return to the United States. With the focus on the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the assassination of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., the second to last novel in Angelou's autobiographical series shows the start of her writing career – her writing her first novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Kirkpatrick 2014:6). As a final installment to her autobiographies, Angelou published the novel *Mom & Me & Mom* in 2013, in which she talks about her relationship with her mother Vivian (Spring 2017).

6.2. Poetry, other accomplishments and death

Maya Angelou gained worldwide recognition not only because of her novels but because of her poetry as well. She always loved literature and poetry and started writing poetry and essays in her childhood (Spring 2017). Her first book of poetry titled *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie* was published in 1971. The collection of poems based on topics of love and race earned Angelou a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize (Cox 2006:69). In 1975, Angelou received a Rockefeller Foundation Scholarship and published another collection of poems titled *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*. In 1978, she published one of her most notable and

famous poetry collections *And Still I Rise*. The 1990s were the most fruitful period for Angelou's poetry – she published the poetry collections *I Shall Not Be Moved* in 1990, *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now* in 1993, and *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* in 1994 (West 2002:14). All of her poems are based on her personal history and complicated life from different points of view (Britannica).

Angelou's success was not reserved for novels and poetry only. In 1966, Angelou moved to Sweden to study and write cinematography. This decision led to Angelou being one of the few women admitted into the Director's Guild of America. Her lessons in cinematography gave her the knowledge and expertise to write the musical score and original screenplay for the 1972 film *Georgia, Georgia* (West 2002:13). By doing so, Angelou became one of the first African American women to have written a screenplay produced as a feature movie. After her screenplay debut, Angelou acted in a few movies, some of which are *How To Make an American Quilt* and *Poetic Justice*, as well as in the miniseries *Roots*. She performed on Broadway in the play *Look Away* for which she received a Tony Award nomination, despite the play closing after only one performance (Britannica). Angelou was the first African American woman director in Hollywood. She was the author and the executive producer of the television miniseries *Three Way Choice*, and she wrote and produced the documentary *Afro-Americans in the Arts* for which she received the Golden Eagle Award (Academy of American Poets 2013). She was nominated for an Emmy for her portrayal of the character Nyo Boto in the miniseries Roots (West 2002:13).

With the success of her first novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou became the first African American woman on the *New York Times* nonfiction list of bestsellers (Cox 2006:7). She has also received the Woman of the Year Award in Communications of the *Ladies' Home Journal* (Burt 1998:4). Angelou was offered a lifetime chair as a professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina in 1981. Despite not having a college

education, she was often referred to as “Dr. Angelou” (Britannica). In 1993, Angelou was asked to write and deliver a poem at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, for which she wrote the poem *On The Pulse of Morning*. Kirkpatrick states that “she was the first African American and the first woman to be given such an honor” (2014:5). Angelou received the National Medal of Arts in 2000 and ten years later, in 2010, President Barack Obama awarded her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom (Academy of American Poets 2013).

Maya Angelou passed away on May 28, 2014. Many memorials were held in her honor, such as the ones at Glide Memorial Church and Wake Forest University. As a way of respecting her legacy, the US Postal Service issued a stamp with her image on it the following year (Spring 2017).

7. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* - the analysis of the novel

In her first autobiographical novel published in 1969, Angelou describes the first decade and a half of her life and the struggles she endured as a young African American girl constantly moving from one part of the United States to another. The title of Angelou's first autobiography was taken from a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem *Sympathy*. Cox explains that Angelou chose that line as the title because she refers to herself as a 'caged bird' "because of her little-girl longings and because of the prejudiced attitudes she lives under" (2006:7).

The novel starts with young Angelou, her birth name Marguerite, and her brother Bailey as they have to move to their grandmother Annie Henderson to Stamps, Arkansas because of their parents' divorce. Annie, also called Momma, is the owner of the only store in the African American part of the town hit by the Great Depression and both grandchildren help with the store management (Wightman and Bauer 2024). During her stay in Stamps, Marguerite witnesses many examples of racism that leave her feeling inferior to other children, both black and white (Adhikary 2020:2). She witnesses Momma hiding a young African American man from white men because of a supposed incident with a white woman, as well as a group of white girls mocking Momma who stoically accepts it. These interactions soon become imprinted into Marguerite's young mind (Wightman and Bauer 2024). At the time she was growing up, Maya had no other choice but to feel caged in her community and the general society – she was a young African American woman who was striving for a life bigger and better than the lives of other African American girls in her position. The novel portrays the obstacles and troubles Maya had to overcome in the United States, a patriarchal country with a long history of racism (Adhikary 2020:4). It is no surprise that Maya, just like Pecola Breedlove in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, yearns to change her already unstable identity. At the very beginning of the novel, she expresses the wish to change herself to be more liked: "Wouldn't they be surprised when

one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about 'my daddy must of been a Chinaman' (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty. Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil" (Angelou 1969:5-6). The divorce of her parents and moving to Stamps left Maya unsure of her place in the family and society, which is why she starts to experience an identity crisis – she disregards the characteristics she has and dreams of an identity made of elements of the Caucasian beauty standard (Walker 1995:97). Away from her parents in a small predominately white town that dislikes African Americans, Maya loses her identity because she feels she is "the abandoned, unwanted, troublemaker child" (Zhao 2018:419). In comparison to other Caucasian children, she considers herself ugly, which only strengthens the self-hatred she is already experiencing (Zhao 2018:419). In the context of Maya's attitude toward herself, Roscan introduces Mary Vermillion's term *somatophobia* – "a condition defined by the fragmentation of identity as a result of a traumatic event" (2019:148). The life in St. Louis is seemingly better for the siblings as they are finally reunited with their mother, but it soon becomes terrible as Marguerite is molested and raped by her mother's boyfriend at the age of 8 (Wightman and Bauer 2024). Despite not wanting to tell the truth to her family members, her mother's boyfriend is found murdered a few days after the trial. The incident leaves a big impact on young Marguerite who, out of guilt and shame of being sexually abused, becomes mute as a response to the trauma she experienced (Adhikary 2020:2). While staying at Stamps, she also witnessed many occasions in which racist remarks were made

towards the people she loves, such as her grandmother Momma being humiliated by white girls. The two experiences combined result in Maya carrying the weight of cultural trauma on her shoulders – the loss of identity affecting a group that has created a strong bond and cohesion (Adhikary 2020:4). Maya feels a strong connection to the African American community she meets in Stamps, which is why every injustice done to one African American person hurts as if it had been done to her. Over time and with the efforts of people important to Maya, being part of the Black community in Stamps helped her find her confidence and accept her identity as a unique African American woman (Zhao 2018:419).

In the novel, two people stand out when discussing Maya's acceptance of her identity – Momma and Mrs. Flowers. The two women, both in their respective ways, teach her important lessons on identity, personal worth, dealing with racism, and womanhood. Since she moved to Stamps at the age of 3, Maya has perceived Momma as "the moral center of her family" – she was the backbone of the African American community in Stamps and the capable leader of her household (Fernandes Corrêa 2011:80). Despite being an older African American woman, Momma was in charge of a store in Stamps and people respected her because of her values and honesty. Her personality and emotional strength made her one of the first female role models Maya had that taught her how to be a strong woman. Still, at times, Maya did not understand Momma's actions and decisions. When a group of white schoolgirls starts to insult Momma with racial slurs, she remains unfazed and sings before formally greeting the girls goodbye, which infuriates her granddaughter: "I burst. A firecracker July-the-Fourth burst. How could Momma call them Miz? The mean nasty things. Why couldn't she have come inside the sweet, cool store when we saw them breasting the hill? What did she prove? And then if they were dirty, mean and impudent, why did Momma have to call them Miz?" (Angelou 1969:25). Even if young Angelou cannot fully comprehend what occurred on the front porch of the house, on an unconscious level she understands the reasoning behind Momma's actions. In her eyes,

Momma becomes Maya's hero because of her position in the community, her outlook on life, and the values she strongly follows and cherishes. The one thing her grandmother paid close attention to was cleanliness: "but Momma convinced us that not only was cleanliness next to Godliness, dirtiness was the inventor of misery" (Angelou 1969:22). Momma uses the phrase to teach Maya an important lesson about the relationship between African Americans and Caucasians. By keeping themselves clean and being polite to white people, even when they throw racist remarks at them, both Momma and Maya come out victorious in the interaction. With their dignity intact, the grandmother and granddaughter are the ones who "subtly throw the attempt to degrade them back on the oppressor" (Walker 1995:95-96). The other role model Maya had in her childhood was Mrs. Flowers. She is the epitome of what Maya strives for – she is educated and smart, has beautiful black skin, and is polite to other people in the community. Young Maya starts meeting Mrs. Flowers in an attempt to overcome her muteness. Over time, their meetings teach Maya about the importance and power of the spoken word: "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning" (Angelou 1969:72). These words not only make Maya speak again after years of silence, but they also shine a light on all the words that Momma has been telling her since she came to Stamps. The lessons on words taught her how to value the older generation of the African American community and how their stories and voices matter. By doing so, Maya recognizes her strength and realizes that her worth as a woman is not related to other people and the actions they do toward her, such as the rape she experienced. Rather, her worth comes from her perception of herself and the values she carries with her. In that sense, Fernandes Corrêa states how "Mrs. Flowers serves as a metaphor of young Maya's blossoming into adulthood, and she provides the necessary force to break the cocoon into which Maya had crept" (2011:84). The immense impact Mrs. Flowers had on Maya's life and identity can be felt through Angelou's words of praise for her: "She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever

known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be" (Angelou 1969:69). Both Momma and Mrs. Flowers taught Maya how to break away from the stereotypes created by men usually associated with 'true womanhood'. The opinion that women should be generally pure and submissive was just the attempt men made to keep women under their control and deny them their rights and freedom (Roscan 2019:146). The strong women in Maya's life helped her find the strength she had to stand up for herself and fight for what she believes is right.

On top of the internalized hate Maya experienced throughout her childhood, as well as the struggles with her identity as an African American woman, she also had to face racist remarks regularly. Because of the cultural trauma she carries with her and being a target of discrimination and different types of attack solely based on her skin color, Walker states that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* tells the story of "how undeservingly its protagonist was relegated to second-class citizenship in her early years" (1995:93). The world in which Maya develops is a world built on oppression, hate, and humiliation of the African American community that is trying to flourish in a place where "possibilities were severely limited by society's inequity" (Fernandes Corrêa 2011:79). Being in an unfavorable position as a young African American woman, Angelou fights racism and discrimination through small actions. When a white dentist does not want to treat her because of the color of her skin, Maya imagines Momma, "ten feet tall with eight-foot arms" (Angelou 1969:136), walking into his office and scaring the dentist to tears because he disrespected her granddaughter. At 10 years old, Maya works as a cook for Mrs. Cullinan, a white woman who decides to rename Marguerite into Mary because it is more convenient for her. After weeks of tolerating it, Maya is furious because of her actions and decides to break one of her glasses on the kitchen floor. The chaos that occurred was overshadowed by one detail – in her anger, Mrs. Cullinan finally calls Angelou by her real name: "Everything was happening so fast I can't remember whether her action preceded her

words, but I know that Mrs. Cullinan said, 'Her name's Margaret, goddamn it, her name's Margaret.' (…) I left the front door wide open so all the neighbors could hear. Mrs. Cullinan was right about one thing. My name wasn't Mary" (Angelou 1969:81). As insignificant as broken glass may seem at first, it is Maya's way of fighting the discrimination she faces constantly. She does not fight it in an open and direct way, but rather through small actions that are, to her, signs of active oppression of the supposedly superior white society. Walker points out how the moment Angelou breaks the glass is "an important stage in the progression of strategies for responding to racial oppression from helpless indignation, to subtle resistance, to active protest" (1995:99). Maya uses the knowledge gathered from Mrs. Flowers to fight the oppression as well, as she now realizes that words cannot hurt you if you do not give them the power to hurt. Through her battle with oppression and racism, as well as the search for herself in many different places and situations, Maya ultimately comes to the conclusion that "all the races were equal and necessary parts of the world" (Zhao 2018:421).

All three important aspects of the novel bleed into one another – the development of Maya's identity cannot be discussed without mentioning the racist conditions in which she was raised and the fact that she is a woman. On the other hand, the support she experienced from her African American community, especially her grandmother and Mrs. Flowers, helped her with the establishment of her identity and self-confidence as a woman. With all the disadvantages she faced throughout her life, she grew into a person who knows her worth and can fight for her rights and freedom. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou gives an insight into the complex psychological changes that occur in the mind of a young African American woman trying to find herself both personally and professionally while she is "breaking the bars of the cage that imprisoned her" (Fernandes Corrêa 2011:79).

8. *Gather Together In My Name* - the analysis of the novel

Gather Together In My Name is Angelou's second autobiographical novel which was published in 1974. The storyline of the novel builds on the plot of the first novel and begins with Marguerite, or Maya, just having a baby son at the age of 16.

Maya's struggle to balance her life as a mother and her life as a woman is one of the main themes of the novel. From the ages of 17 to 19, Maya "bounced around the underside of society" as she tried to navigate finding love and financially supporting herself and her son (Cox 2006:23). This period proved to be incredibly stressful for Maya – she is an adolescent who just had a child, does not have a partner who can help her with raising her son, and does not have an education or a job. Without any other solutions, her only option is to experiment and try her luck in attempting to secure a good life for her and her son (Arunkumar and Kumaresan 2019:1241). Because of her lack of education and the color of her skin, Maya cannot choose a job; rather, she prays that someone accepts her for a job position. After being rejected for a telephone operator position, she lands a job as a cook in a Creole restaurant. After a short time, Maya switches careers and becomes a madam, but just as quickly as she finds the job she leaves it to move back to Stamps. In many instances, it is clear that she wishes to do what is best for her and her son, but that it also involves doing jobs that she does not want to or is not fit to perform. As a teenage mother, Maya is put into a position of trying to find herself as a grown individual while carrying the responsibility of providing for a child. In a way, it is a situation of a child raising a child without the support needed. Maya's mother Vivian is not a present mother figure in her daughter's life, which results in Maya never explicitly asking for Vivian's help regarding her son. As Arunkumar and Kumaresan state, Maya "didn't have her mother and community of 'different mothers' to depend on for help with childcare" as it is common within the African American community (2019:1242). From a young age, Maya distances herself from

her closest family as she does not believe she belongs or has a spot in her family. The closest relationship she has is with her brother, Bailey, with whom she grew distant over time (Vijayakumar 2022:1334). With the birth of her child, the little family support she has is gone. She is, just like in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, left to her own devices and attempts to make her and her son's life good, even if that means working jobs that are considered marginalized or changing her identity: "There it was. I would get a job, and a room of my own, and take my beautiful son out into the world. I thought I might even move to another town and change our names" (Angelou 2009:8). Fathy Alhefnawy points out how "her multiple vocations mirror the pathetic situations and constrain lifestyles of African American women in the so-called promised land, United States of America" (2020:160). While motherhood in white communities is associated with domesticity, the African American communities intertwine motherhood and work – the closest women in Maya's life are strong and capable women who take care of their homes while simultaneously working to provide for the family (Koyana 2002:35). Maya, subconsciously, expects a successful balancing of motherhood and work because that is what she has been exposed to her whole life. In the African American community, being a nonworking mother who only cares for the house and children is "an extremely sterile existence" (Beal 2008:167). Despite the struggle it causes her, being a working mother is a part of Maya's African American heritage she cannot escape. But she is still, as Arunkumar and Kumaresan define, "a youngster" who needs to make mistakes and take the wrong paths in life before she realizes who she is as an individual and as a good parent.

As it is natural for adolescents, Maya is searching for her identity and who she is as a person outside of motherhood. Without an education higher than a high school diploma, her choices of professionally developing and advancing are scarce. But with every job opportunity she finds, she is left at the crossroads of deciding if she wants to focus on her son or her career. The socially expected choice is directing her focus more on her son than on her development as an

individual – society expects mothers to be selfless and put their child's needs before their own (Arunkumar and Kumaresan 2019:1247). By attempting to secure a living for both of them, Maya is put in dangerous and troubling job positions that seemingly do not help her achieve her potential. The constant rejections and failures lead Maya to believe that success is not reserved for young African American women: "My career was over before it began. My tears came hot and angry. I had dared so many things and failed. There was to be nothing left to do. I had given Curly my young love; he had gone away to marry another woman. The self-defense tactics with the lesbians had gained me a whorehouse, which I had neither the skill nor the courage to keep. I had fled to the home of my youth and had been sent away. The Army and now my dance career, the one thing I wanted beyond all others (needed, in fact) for my son but mostly for myself, had been plucked right out of my fingers. All the doors had slammed shut, and I was locked into a too-tall body, with an unpretty face, and a mind that bounced around like a ping-pong ball. I gave in to sadness because I had no choice" (Angelou 2009:112). At this moment, it is visible that Maya equals her identity and self-worth to her ability to keep a job and support herself and her son. If she cannot work and earn, she is unworthy and not valuable. Maya's life does not follow the standard pattern – she does not experience a happy childhood in a stable home surrounded by loving parents. Instead, like many African American women, she is displaced in a white-dominated world where she needs to be reborn, or transformed, to find her voice and confidently tell her story to the world (Hembrough 165). Vijayakumar states that "Maya was a casualty of both the bigot and chauvinist society" but still never gives up. Instead, she overcomes the obstacles life prepares for her and succeeds (2022:1334). As Maya herself says after ending her partnership with R.L. Poole, "the only way up was up" (Angelou 2009:101). Precisely because of the unfavorable and tragic conditions she is constantly exposed to, Maya can realize who she is and can start building her identity as a confident young woman who knows her worth and strength.

Maya's life changes when she gets a job as a swing-shift waitress at the Chicken Shack. While working there, she meets R.L. Poole, a dancer looking for a partner for upcoming shows (Cox 2006:28). Her awful audition does not ruin her chances for work and she becomes Poole's dance partner. After a few rather unsuccessful shows together and unreciprocated affection from Poole's side, Maya decides to move away and work as a fry cook in a restaurant (Fathy Alhefnawy 2020:150-151). At this job position, she meets L.D. Toolbrook, a gambler with whom she quickly falls in love with and who soon becomes Maya's pimp. The rape incident from Angelou's first novel, as well as witnessing the dying marriage of her parents, leaves Maya unable to comprehend how healthy relationships should function. There are many instances in the novel where it is obvious that Maya's rape left a mark on her – the men she falls in love with are always older and more successful than her, similar to her mother's ex-boyfriend. Maya searches for the type of stability in her relationships similar to that of a father and daughter: "He would be a little younger than my father, and handsome in that casual way. His conservative clothes would fit well, and he'd talk to me softly and look at me penetratingly. He'd often pat me and tell me how proud he was of me and I'd strain to make him even prouder" (Angelou 2009:116). Without a proper father figure in her childhood, she searches for love in older men to compensate for what she never experienced. At one point in the novel, Maya is trying to convince herself that being a prostitute for the sake of a man is a good and normal choice: "I reassured myself. I was helping my man. And, after all, there was nothing wrong with sex. I had no need for shame. Society dictated that sex was only licensed by marriage documents. Well, I didn't agree with that. Society is a conglomerate of human beings, and that's just what I was. A human being" (Angelou 2009:135). The men Maya falls in love with usually exploit her and devalue her as a person, somewhat making her their property, but still she sees the relationships and sexual pleasure as something worth pursuing (Wall 2014:5). By the end of the novel, she comes to the realization that sexual pleasure is not the same as love and that allowing

yourself to be led by unrealistic ideas of romance can, in some cases, be the beginning of your downfall. Throughout the novel, Maya's love life becomes closely intertwined with drug abuse. The abuse first starts with T.L. Toolbrook, but she stops herself from falling into addiction. After separating herself from T.L., Maya meets another troubled man named Troubadour Martin who she finds attractive and she falls in love. Maya decides to abuse heroin as a way of attracting Troubadour (Fathy Alhefnawy 2020:151). Her confrontation with Troubadour's addiction was the wake-up call Maya needed to understand that her attitude towards relationships and love is wrong – she is giving love, but receiving nothing in return except trouble. With her emotional and psychological growth throughout the 2 years the novel follows, in the end, she comes to terms with the fact that lust is not the reason for accepting the horrible treatment men put her through. Her newly gained confidence in her identity and her words allowed Maya to walk away from the constraints of toxic relationships and walk toward her well-being and further personal growth.

9. Morrison's and Angelou's protagonists in the social context

Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou started writing their novels during the most important period of African American literary history. By creating complex female characters who resonated with many African American girls and women, as well as themselves, Morrison and Angelou gave a voice and recognition to those whose words are often unheard and whose struggles are overlooked. As Fernandes Corrêa states, African American female authors in the second half of the 20th century "formulated a counter-discourse that allowed black women to name and identify the relations between their individual experiences and the social structures, between their personal problems and socio-historical issues" (2011:78).

The significance of any literary work cannot be discussed without understanding the social and political circumstances in which the work was created. When it comes to Morrison and Angelou, their novels analyzed in this paper were written between 1969 (the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) and 2015 (the publication of *God Help the Child*). In almost five decades, the African American community has gone through many changes and battles for their rights. Both authors published their debut novels at the beginning of the 1970s – the decade still deeply influenced by the death of Malcolm X, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the rise of Black Power as a movement based on "urging African Americans to arm themselves and demand full employment, decent housing and control over their own communities" (Black History in the United States: A Timeline 2009 Oct 14). The 1960s were, in a sense, becoming the second Black Renaissance for African Americans (Lee 2003:72-73). The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s proved to be a turning point for African American literature. Black authors of that era realized that to change their status in society and the conditions they were exposed to, they needed to propagate Black Aesthetics and free themselves from the beauty norms of the white Western society (Anyu 2018:32-33).

The movements of the 1960s and 1970s, mainly the Black Power movement, brought hope into the African American community, especially into the lives of African American women who believed that it would finally bring equality between black men and women. Still, their hopes were not met as the Black Power movement was heavily shaped by sexism and male dominance (Breines 2006:70). At the time, a classic conception of the role of an African American woman consisted of her being a stay-at-home mother, a faithful wife to her husband who "goes out into society and brings back a little piece of the world for her", and a person who "cannot develop herself as an individual, having been reduced to only a biological function" – which is reproduction (Beal 2008:167). The societal expectation of women in general, including African American women, always involved a hint of inferiority and oppression toward the female gender. It was expected of African American women to stand behind their men and support them because they were the leaders of the movement. They were supposed to stand up for themselves by being in the background and letting men fight their battles for them. It could be said that African American women have always had to carry two burdens – one because they are women and another because they are black (Matas 2021:94). Beal states how the position of an African American woman in the United States can be described as being a "slave to a slave" (2008:168). Always perceived as submissive in every situation and environment, the identity of black women became intertwined with the idea that they are lower beings in comparison to men in their community and society as a whole. These beliefs are reflected in Morrison's and Angelou's works. Their heroines – young African American girls and women who are still trying to find themselves in a white-dominated world – are always defined by society's interpretation of their worth. Pecola, Bride and Maya are all victims of their surroundings and experience a waste of individual potential because of the environmental circumstances in which they are living (Corrier-Hamilton 115), which was and still is the everyday reality of many African American girls and women.

In the second half of the 20th century, autobiographies became the mediums through which African American female writers could send "political and artistic messages of social change" (Roscan 2019:150). Currie states how Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was one of the books written by an African American female author that talked about the feminist sensibility of African American women (2011:87). When discussing African American women throughout history, especially the history of the Western world, black women were not perceived as sensible or feminine in comparison to Caucasian women. They were not considered gentle ladies, but rather cold and reserved women who performed hard labor work to provide for their families (Palmer 1983:153). They were either oversexualized or perceived as "asexual and emasculating" (Wilkins 2012:174). The duality of the interpretation of femininity regarding African American women often meant that they could not walk away from one stereotype without walking straight into another. They couldn't exist as ordinary humans without occupying a special social position assigned by the dominant white culture (Wilkins 2012:174-175). Both Morrison and Angelou depict this struggle in their novels. Their protagonists are always stereotypically portrayed by the white community – they are seen as dirty, lazy, and a cheap labor force. But even with these remarks made toward them, the three heroines of the novels are still feminine. They are desired by men, they are hardworking and they are compassionate toward people close to them in their community. The idea that femininity or cleanliness is equal to whiteness is so deeply embedded in society, both the Caucasian and minority communities, that it is easy for people of color to believe it. By writing raw and honest stories about the realistic upbringing of African American women, their struggles and victories, Morrison and Angelou celebrate black women and pay their respect to the strength it takes to live freely in a society that takes every opportunity to break you down. They show the readers, no matter which race or ethnicity they belong to, that women can be anything despite the environment in which they develop – they can be beautiful, kind, angry,

sad, oppressed, cruel, or ambitious. They can follow the tragic trajectory that society prepared for them and go mad, but they can also be cooks, drivers, entrepreneurs, and anything they set their minds to. Morrison's and Angelou's novels convey the message that the choice to identify and characterize women in any way is, ultimately, their own choice.

A large number of African American women, unfortunately, live their lives similarly to Pecola Breedlove. Heavily exposed to Western beauty standards, their only wish is to conform and fit into the mold the white society created. Without the proper support from their communities or family members who are, most likely, battling the same battles as they are, it comes as no surprise that young girls are distancing themselves from their African American heritage and adapting the culture, style and values of the white majority. Wright states how African American women who experience low self-confidence "lower their standards, neglect their self-worth, and value" (2017:27). The rejection of African American beauty has been a constant in American society since the first slaves came to the United States. Bombarded by the overflowing masses of Caucasian people who put themselves above them, the African Americans trying to navigate life did not stand a chance against the dominant culture. Their identities and who they are got carried away by the societal dictation of who they should be to be perceived as good enough. It is argued that African Americans who live in hostile and racist environments, no matter their gender, form negative identities (Stevens 1997:147). According to Shorter-Gooden and Washington, identity is "a self-definition which is comprised of goals, values, and beliefs to which the person is committed and which provide a sense of continuity over time" (466). In the case of Pecola Breedlove, her commitment to the values and beliefs of Western society proved to be her downfall. By obsessing over the mainstream opinions and characteristics, her already unstable African American identity was consumed by self-hatred and feelings of not belonging.

On the other hand, the African American community is filled with girls and women similar to Bride and Maya. Horribly mistreated at the beginning of their lives, the young girls used the trauma to their advantage and rose above the racism, neglect and abuse that defined them. Both Bride and Maya are the role models African American women of all ages should look up to. Despite their initial feelings of displacement, they were able to find the necessary support in their community and themselves, which ultimately gave them the motivation to find their confidence and identity. The research done by Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Lovejoy on the racial identity and body image in African American female adolescents suggests that African American girls who have a strong connection with their confident group or community will have greater self-confidence. They also suggest that "a strong sense of racial identity is linked directly to girl's positive self-esteem and non-internalization" (2004:72). The evidence the research found can be witnessed in Morrison's and Angelou's books as well. In Angelou's autobiographies, the only constant in Maya's life is her African American community and her heritage. Details such as Momma's connection to the African American culture and her position in society, Mrs. Flowers' attempts to make Maya talk again and even Vivian's approval of any job Maya takes as long as she keeps her integrity and morals are all important factors that contribute to Maya establishing a strong connection to her culture and her identity as a young African American woman. Bride in Morrison's *God Help the Child*, however, did not have good family or community relationships to help her find her identity. Being shunned away by her mother from birth because of the color of her skin, she faked her confidence until her past started to resurface. Faced with the weight of the past, Bride's true acceptance and self-love started the moment she became honest with herself about her actions in her childhood. These examples of two African American women, both born and raised in tragic life conditions filled with discrimination, can be seen as the foundations of confidence for young African American girls and women who are living in similar or identical situations.

Stories and fiction are the cultural means people use to claim and give meaning to different classed and gendered identities in day-to-day life (Wilkins 2012:192). For many African American girls and women, the works of Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou "provided the missing mirrors in which they could finally see themselves" (Wall 2014:3). They finally felt seen when reading about love, pain, happiness, and struggle that they knew all too well. They realized that they were not alone in the battle for respect and equality and that they had the strength to fight for themselves and their bright future. Serving as role models for millions of unappreciated, displaced, abused, and unloved African American women who have been disconnected from their identity and heritage, Morrison and Angelou are the force that is pulling them back to their real selves. Because "being a black female is a "unique" identity compared with being "just" a female" (Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Lovejoy 2004:58), there are no better authors to truthfully tell the life stories of black women than Morrison and Angelou. Kundi states that "the life experiences of these women are running commentaries of their personal journeys from childhood into womanhood. In exploring what it means to be poor, black and female, they present mirror images of 'self' and the 'other' to the world. The presentation of the knowledge of their 'self' to others through life writing is significant because it provides the readers or listeners with personal perceptions that determine their self-identity, which is necessarily reliant on their culture, environment, upbringing, general background and other factors that substantially impact their lives" (2020:52). Being a woman, especially of African American descent, is a blessing and a curse. It is the constant balancing of adapting to society and rejecting the idea it is trying to impose on you. It is allowing people to dictate what you must do because they refuse to hear your voice. In *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou writes: "People will take advantage of you if you let them. Especially Negro women. Everybody his brother and his dog, thinks he can walk a road in a colored woman's behind. But you remember this, now. Your mother raised you. You're full-grown. Let them catch it like they find

it. If you haven't been trained at home to their liking tell them to get to stepping.” Here a whisper of delight crawled over her face “Stepping. But not on you.” (105). The message she is trying to spread is clear – African American women need to stand their ground when faced with oppression and misogyny because nobody is allowed to step on them anymore.

10. Conclusion

Literature has been an essential part of the African American culture since the first arrival of slaves to the United States. By first sharing their feelings and experiences orally, and then in written form, the slaves attempted to show the rest of society that they were not different from the white majority. Authors like Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W.E.B. DuBois, and many others carved the path for the acceptance of African Americans by writing testimonies of the real-life conditions and struggles of multiple African American generations. Two authors who made a difference with their works in the 20th century are Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou. By writing the novels *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*, Morrison told the story of two African American women born in two vastly different generations who, nevertheless, experience the same hardships and issues in terms of their families, relationships, and identities despite living hundreds of years apart. Angelou shared the story of thousands of African American women by opening up about her upbringing and the search for stability, both emotional and financial, in her autobiographical works *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name*.

D.H. Lawrence in his essay *Why the Novel Matters* said that "the novel is the one bright book of life" (1936:168). That is what Morrison's and Angelou's novels are – novels that contain the history, emotions, troubles, and joys of the lives of African American women throughout the centuries. Their literary works remain important written testaments of the lives of African American women who often had to fight battles they already knew they lost. By giving them a voice and the appropriate representation, Morrison and Angelou allowed generations of Black women to stand up for themselves, allowed them to find and express themselves, and live their lives authentically and freely. Their protagonists, vulnerable yet strong African American women, remind the readers to accept the fall and continue the rise –

not only African American women but women in general. With the constant dictation regarding who women need to be and how they need to behave to be accepted, attractive, or loved by other women or men of any community, the four novels discussed in this paper serve as the wind in the back of the female resistance to traditional and conservative views of the past.

Despite the tremendous positive change Morrison, Angelou, and other African American female and male authors have made, it should not be forgotten that “black issues, as race and ethnicity in general, in fact have anything but gone missing” (Lee 2003:69). With the ongoing battle for racial, class and gender equality, it is unsure when such a change is going to be achieved. However, with the legacy of authors such as Morrison, Angelou, and many other inspiring African American writers, the future generations entail the strength of the whole African American community ready to be truthfully seen and heard.

SUMMARY

Literature, as an art form, is one of the foundations of every culture and social group. From its beginnings African-American literature, both oral and written, was the only way for African Americans to express their emotions and recount their often tragic life stories. In the development of African American literature, a significant role was played by authors who, in addition to creating literature, were actively involved in the fight for the rights of African-Americans. Two such female authors, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, through their works provided insight into the lives, problems, rises and falls of young African-American women trying to succeed in a world that does not accept them. Through the analysis of the selected works of the authors, this thesis emphasizes the influence Morrison and Angelou had on the development of the identity of African-American girls and women.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, African American literature, African American women, African American identity

SAŽETAK

Književnost, kao dio glavnih grana umjetnosti, jedna je od temelja svake kulture i društvene skupine. Afroamerička književnost, usmena i pisana, od svojih je početaka Afroamerikancima bila jedini način izražavanja emocija i prepričavanja svojih, nerijetko tragičnih, životnih priča. U razvoju afroameričke književnosti značajnu su ulogu imali autori koji su se, osim književnim stvaralaštvom, aktivno bavili i borbom za prava Afroamerikanaca. Dvije takve autorice, Toni Morrison i Maya Angelou, svojim su radom i djelima pružile uvid u živote, probleme, uspone i padove mladih Afroamerikanki koje pokušavaju uspjeti u svijetu koji ih ne prihvaća. Analizom odabranih djela navedenih autorica, u ovom radu se ističe utjecaj koji su Morrison i Angelou imale na razvoj identiteta afroameričkih djevojaka i žena.

Ključne riječi: Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, afroamerička književnost, Afroamerikanke, afroamerički identitet

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