

SVEUČILIŠTE U SPLITU

FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

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**TONI MORRISON – EMOTIONS AND POLITICS IN AFRICAN
AMERICAN LITERATURE**

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Datum objavljivanja na webu: 15. prosinca 2023.

ZNANSTVENO PODRUČJE: Humanističke znanosti

ZNANSTVENO POLJE: Filologija

ZNANSTVENA GRANA: Anglistika

STUDIJSKI PROGRAM: Preddiplomski studij Engleski jezik i književnost

NASTAVNI PREDMET: Američka književnost

GODINA I SEMESTAR: 3. godina, 6. semestar

GODIŠNJI BROJ SATI:

Predmet godišnje – 15 sati predavanja + 60 sati vježbi (2 grupe po 30 sati)

NASTAVNA CJELINA: Suvremena američka književnost

NASTAVNA JEDINICA: Toni Morrison

NASTAVNO SREDSTVO: PowerPoint prezentacija

NASTAVNO POMAGALO: računalo, projektor

ISHODI UČENJA:

- definirati pojmove: afroamerički identitet i emocije
- objasniti ulogu ranih afroameričkih pisaca
- objasniti važnost Toni Morrison
- opisati revidiranje (afro)američke povijesti u romanima Toni Morrison

KORELACIJA: ostali sadržaji iz kolegija Afroamerička književnost te kolegija Društvo i kultura SAD-a

LITERATURA:

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Toni Morrison – Emotions and Politics in African American Literature

1. Introduction

From their literary beginnings African Americans have desired to reform conventional American notions of race with a general concern for social acceptance and participation. The development of their artistic culture should be seen as deriving significantly from this reformatory spirit as well as from the need to create culture as a form of protest (Napier 2000).¹ The formal beginnings of African American literary theory can be traced in the early part of the twentieth century when African American authors wrote mainly in magazines to report on their society (Graham 2004)², when many African American authors started voicing their concern with the use of literature as a means of affirming blacks, while counteracting traditional notions of race and prejudices that stem from it. Early African American literary critics and editors realized that the value of black

¹ Napier, Winston, ed. (2000). *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press.

² Graham, Maryemma, ed. (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

literature is to be found in its ability to nurture positive self-images in the face of adversity.

2. The role of early African American writers

During the 1920s, a number of young writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and George S. Schulyer emerged to be some of the key authors in the realization of the Harlem Renaissance. Their works addressed, among others, issues of cultural identity and psychological reconstruction. Regarded by many to be the central cultural and literary event in the history of black America, the Harlem Renaissance generated a literary and cultural environment that would establish the black author as a crucial social force. During that period the role of writers and their work towards the improvement of African American identity became increasingly recognized. Consequently, the augmented establishment of literary critical concerns played a central role in the evolution, definition and identity of black society in the United States. The writings of the authors belonging to the Harlem Renaissance created the canon which will later be analyzed by literary critics and theorists. Moreover, this literary period influenced numerous African American authors for decades to come.

African American author and critic Alain Locke also argued that literature should be used to reconstruct African American social identities. In his introduction to the first black anthology, *The New Negro*³, Locke expressed his

³ Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro*. 1925; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1983.

confidence in young black artists' dedication to represent black America in new terms. According to Locke, the New Negro has emerged with a new psychology that provides a framework for a liberation from white America's definition of blacks as culturally and intellectually barren, inferior people (Napier 2000: 2). Locke sensed that the role of the black writer was to use art to represent blacks in a different light which will serve not only as a myth eraser, but also as a means of proving how black authors could develop and regulate a positive self-identity. Locke recognized the importance of authors and stated in *The New Negro* that black authors should "prove the key to that reevaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relations" (1983:15). Black theorists could build on the political, cultural and aesthetic concerns articulated by authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal, to name just a few of them. The importance of Zora Neale Hurston and her work that spans from novels and essays, to folklore and anthropological works, is essential both for the Harlem Renaissance and a number of later authors, including Toni Morrison, who draws on her work and who puts black women at the center of her interest.

3. The Importance of Toni Morrison and her works

Toni Morrison (Lorain 1931 – New York, 2019) is one of the most important and most influential African American authors. During her long literary

career, she also worked as a book editor, essayist and a university professor. Novels are at the core of Morrison's literary career and she is best known as an outstanding novelist who received numerous literary awards, including the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Each of her novels deals with a certain period of time that is important for the advancement of African American rights. Each novel also tackles certain political decisions that influenced the lives of African Americans, from the abolition of slavery to the present day. The list of her novels includes the following works:

1. *The Bluest Eye* (1970),
2. *Sula* (1973),
3. *Song of Solomon* (1977),
4. *Tar Baby* (1981),
5. *Beloved* (1987),
6. *Jazz* (1992),
7. *Paradise* (1998),
8. *Love* (2003),
9. *A Mercy* (2008),
10. *Home* (2012),
11. *God Help the Child* (2015).

In order to understand the complexity of her work we need to go back to the 1970s and 1980s when black women theorists dealt with issues of race, gender,

sexuality, politics and psychology as they were offered theoretical tools needed to define their own experiences and sentiments. Different approaches and different theories have led to an increased understanding of African American literary discourse as multilateral and innovative. The writing of Toni Morrison is significant in this sense too, as it introduces different aspects and characteristics that are prototypical of her literary expression. The unprepared reader will first be amazed (and frequently confused) by the complexity of her work, although her narration appears effortless and smooth. Morrison's novels are unquestionably challenging for many readers, as there are many gaps left that need our interpretation of the various possible historical, political and cultural options that we are given. Morrison creates such an aesthetic deliberately as she is using narrative spaces of her texts as a means of understanding her poetics, cultural politics and other ideas.

4. Toni Morrison's role in the revision of African American history

In her works Morrison also challenges her readers to redefine their notions of emotions, especially love. Love is one of the most frequent themes in literature as well as in art in general. The abundance of various forms of love has contributed to the proliferation of its usages. Consequently, the word love has many different

meanings in different communities, although all of them perceive love as an intense feeling. In African American literature, the theme of love has an equally important status. Though love is inherent in all human cultures and communities, cultural differences make any universal definition difficult to ascertain. Black writing in the United States depicts experience that is specifically African American. In other words, black literature records the historical and cultural circumstances that no other group in the United States shares. While many other racial and ethnic minorities in the United States experience discrimination, no other group was forcibly brought to the United States. Many black authors address this unique historical situation in their works. The themes of racial discrimination and love are rather common in African American literature, especially in the literature written by African American female writers. In her novels, Morrison frequently uses the theme of love to enlarge our notion of what it is to be (black) American.

Therefore, this lecture analyzes the theme of emotional structures in the novels of Morrison and presents how they are enmeshed into the sphere of politics as well as how they reflect and negotiate the history of African Americans. I argue in my book that Morrison writes about love in a way that sees love not only as a fulfillment of personal goals, but also as a realization of different political issues aimed at affirming African Americans.

In her novels Toni Morrison's usually deals with four types of love: romantic love, motherly love, friendly love (a strong emotional connection between two female black characters) and communal love (a complex relationship between a black female individual and her community). This lecture will address Morrison's treatment of love in her first novel.

Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) has set up thematic and technical framework that remains important in her work to follow. The novel explores a black community in a particular time and place i.e. Morrison's birthplace Lorain, Ohio, in the 1940s. Moreover, the novel shows how the events that happen there result from social realities of racism, poverty and prejudice. In order to thoroughly explore these themes, Morrison uses a number of narrative options, from an omniscient narrator to a retrospective first-person narrator. To make things even more challenging for her readers, the narration does not proceed in the straightforward chronological order, but moves back and forth in time. This procedure will remain to be used by Morrison in her consequent novels as well. If we were to sum up the entire novel in one sentence, we could say that in this novel Morrison shows racism and its damaging effects on the black community at large and on black families in particular. Consequently, when the members of this black community absorb the wider culture's racist pictures of themselves, they reflect their prejudice and self-hatred on their most vulnerable and innocent characters. Also, in Morrison's novel, the grown-up people are incapable of

loving one another, as they are marred by their own burdened past and hardships of current lives. According to William Downes (2000)⁴ the cultural and social backgrounds shape our feelings. What is more, he believes that communities construe emotions and influence our decisions.

At the same time, while dealing with the ghosts of African American past Morrison tackles two major social forces in the United States after the World War II, i.e. the feminist movement and the Black Power movement. Due to these two tremendously important movements, American society saw considerable changes from 1950s onwards. On social rights plans, two new laws emerged – the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act. The literature of Toni Morrison draws from these social events and challenges the traditional positions that the black characters usually occupied in the past. Giving women a central position in her novels as well as writing about the “unspoken” physical experiences such as menstruation, abortion, rape and sexuality, Morrison challenges the traditional patterns of female inferiority, especially the inferiority of black women in American society. Much of the female literature at that time, both white and colored, started widely exploring the issues that were previously deemed inappropriate. I have chosen Morrison’s first novel as it introduces her writing procedures and style that have become her trademark. Due to the scope of its topics and the manner of writing, *The Bluest Eye* represents an important

⁴ Downes, William. (2000). "The Language of Felt Experience: Emotional, Evaluative and Intuitive," *Language and Literature* 9.

contribution to the fight for racial and gender equality. It shows how racism can lead to psychological damage and rape as well as to the sense of self-depreciation. Throughout the novel Morrison shows the destructive power of racism, both institutionalized and tacit. One of the central issues of the novel is black women's desire to achieve WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) beauty standards, hoping it would help them achieve romantic love and become accepted by their community that prefers white, blond and blue-eyed girls. The novel discloses how women were exposed to psychological violation and how that violation leads to psychological and physical destruction. Consequently, Toni Morrison's characters cannot experience true love, neither in romantic nor in familial circumstances. For them, love is not an option. Furthermore, imposing unrealistic beauty standards on black girls and women causes the emotional consequences of identifying ugliness with blackness. Therefore, the "Black is beautiful" movement emerged and advocated pride in black skin and African or African American physical features. *The Bluest Eye* is different from previous protest novels as it addresses the black audience as opposed to the previous protest novels that aimed at understanding and compassion from white audience. Consequently, almost all characters in the novel are black. One would expect such a novel to be free of prejudices, if most of the characters are black, but Morrison managed to show to us how even the black communities adopted and internalized the racist standards and how they judge one another according to those principles. The outcome of

such actions is destruction of both children and adults who are incapable of displaying romantic, or any other, love.

Morrison has developed a specific writing style. Although the social and literary movements (especially feminist movement) of the 1960s provide a context for understanding many of Morrison's novels, they do not explain them, but rather leave them to us to draw moral conclusions. Morrison uses a number of techniques that make us think and analyze, rather than be the passive recipients of other people's ideas. The novel's narrative technique is not presented chronologically, but Morrison rather uses techniques of flash-backs and a return to particular events in order to emphasize their importance. Discussing such narrative approaches, Bakhtin claims that usually, the hero "emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself" (23). The hero is "on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to another. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being" (23)⁵. Bakhtin believes that Goethe's contribution to the development of realism is his idea of synchronism – so called "necessary connection" of the past, present, and future in "the unbroken line of historical development" (33).

⁵ Bakhtin, M.M. "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism: Toward a Historical typology of the Novel." *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (1986). Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: U of Texas P, p.10-59.

If we substitute Bakhtin's hero with a heroine, or rather an ethnic heroine, then the emergence of this "new ethnic woman" at the contemporary chronotope has even greater significance than was possible earlier. The new ethnic woman is placed on the borderland of multiple consciousnesses, trying to negotiate her "surplus of humanness" (*Dialogic Imagination* 37)⁶. Furthermore, the roots of the ethnic women do not belong to the Eurocentric hegemony, but are divided into racial oppression, particular social and cultural history as well as fragments of personal memory. For ethnic women, the continuation of historical development is not just necessary but vital to her survival and identity formation. Frequently in the narrative of *Bildung*, ethnic women also need to conquer the terrors of the ghostly return of the past into her present and to exorcise the ghosts of the past (e.g. repressed emotions and memories), so that their growth can continue. In *The Bluest Eye*, there is no ghost that will haunt the protagonists. What haunts them instead is the occurrence of a tragic event in the family of Breedlove. In the novel, the omniscient narrator frequently presents the barrenness of the Breedloves' family life, completely devoid of any romantic feelings. Mr. Breedlove does not display any sort of affection toward his wife and vice versa. Instead of giving love and attention to her husband and daughter, Mrs. Breedlove directs all her emotion toward the white family that she works for. In tracing the roots of family decay, Morrison goes back in time when Pecola's father Cholly was a young boy who

⁶ Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. ed. Michael Holquist. (1981). Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P.

during his first intimacy with his girlfriend was caught by a group of white man who forced him to perform for them, causing sexual and racist humiliation. The traumatic experience scarred Cholly for the rest of his life, leaving him incapable of loving women. Instead, he directed his sexuality towards his daughter, raping her and eventually impregnating her. Although Cholly tried to love his wife Pauline, their relationship could not withstand racism, poverty and being isolated from the community. Racism also harmed Cholly's wife Pauline. Pauline came from a southern black family, but she decided to leave the safety of her home when she decided to marry Cholly and move north looking for a better life. Unfortunately, she never managed to adjust to an urban lifestyle and therefore she always felt as an outcast there. Trying to escape the reality of her harsh life, Pauline frequently goes to the movies and from there she consumes the WASP ideas on female beauties and standard aesthetic values which she later transforms to her daughter.

Since her daughter's look differs significantly from the WASP aesthetics, Pauline decides not to love her own daughter. Therefore, in her novels Morrison tries to make us understand how racism prevented African Americans from providing and receiving love.

5. Conclusion

As I tried to illustrate by the example of Morrison's first book, her novels in general can be read both as a history and a critique of history, with a specific emphasis on African American history. In each case, her novels are approached and dealt with in various manners that provide more room for their recognition and importance in American literature. However, one aspect of her work, i.e. the role of emotions, has been largely overlooked and not systematically dealt with. Although Morrison frequently employs the theme of love in her novels, the treatments of emotions in her novels have received insufficient theoretical attention which I tried to elaborate and emphasize in my book.

It comes as no surprise that African American authors strive to change habitual American notions of race and that they desire to improve the image and position of African Americans within American society. Therefore, African American literature can be read as an effort to achieve social equality of African American individuals and their communities. In that respect, all literary works inevitably turn political. This is particularly true of African Americans who were historically oppressed and institutionally denigrated. The works of Morrison fight for the advancement and development of African Americans as well as for undoing the damage caused by racism and social inequalities. At the same time,

the author addresses the need for a revised cultural identity and psychological reconstruction.

To conclude, Morrison transforms a traditionally personal and privatized genre into a political and historical one and provides a specific interpretation of the axiom "the personal is political." In that respect, even love relationships are devoid of purely emotional context and become yet another contested arena of political and historical struggle. An awareness of one's history is the first step toward understanding one's self. When coupled with historical references, Morrison's novels become even more effective means of realizing political goals and affirming African Americans.

Works cited:

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