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**THE TOPIC OF RACISM IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE**  
**Diplomová práce**

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Prohlašuji, že jsem závěrečnou práci vypracovala samostatně a použila jen uvedených pramenů a literatury.

V Olomouci 14. 4. 2013

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## **ABSTRACT**

Racism is a generally known term and the novels written by black authors are mostly respected. But I decided to go deeper in my thesis. The development, displays and forms of racism are investigated in the beginning of the thesis. The comments on the authors – Harper Lee, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison, and the analyses of the three novels – *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Native Son* and *Beloved* are provided further. A reader will get familiar with dangers of racist attitudes and with its destructive effects on both oppressed and oppressors. The main messages and the morals of these excellent novels are summarised in the last chapter of the thesis.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Racism is generally a controversial issue but unfortunately still actual. Even though recent surveys show that race prejudice is in decline<sup>1</sup>, it is necessary to make every each of us aware of its dangers and possible destroying effects on human soul. Despite the painfulness of such thoughts, mankind should never forget about slavery and enormous suffering that had been caused, because history can repeat itself. Studying and reminding this topic is one of the ways not to let wither these memories away. Writing about this theme is another way of preserving them.

Many novels dealing with racist theories and describing lives of slaves were written. They should not be forgotten, they should be studied and analysed deeply because they carry an important message and warning. This is one of the reasons I have chosen the topic. I am personally interested in the history of racism, its development and exposures and even more in personal experiences of oppressed people who are willing to share their stories and fate with us.

The three main novels *Native Son*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Beloved* which narrate the stories of black people and describe their fight with prejudiced society and also with their own ghosts, both symbolical and literal, have been chosen to be analysed. I deal with these novels' structures, contents and mainly messages. This thesis' aim is to make a reader familiar with the topic of racism in general and then with the three novels and their stories. I have inspected particular manifestations of racist behaviour described in the novels and its effects on the oppressed ones.

The thesis suggests which morals and lessons can be learned from the life stories of Bigger, Sethe and Atticus and Tom Robinson. These are the main characters of the novels who were afflicted by racism in some way and even though their narratives are largely made up, they should be taken seriously and studied in depth.

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1 EDSALL, Thomas B. How Much Does Race Still Matter?. *The New York Times: The Opinion Pages* [online]

## 2. THE HISTORY OF RACISM

Some people believe that racism has always existed in any form. It did not have its name and it did not display itself in such extreme ways as we know it today but these dislikes of one particular group of people towards another have always been present. Be it intolerance of different opinions, habits, attitudes or in wider form dislike against other culture, language, religion or human beings. For example in the ancient world it appeared in the form of tribalism or xenophobia. There had always been a phenomenon of some group of people trying to act like superior and attempting to subordinate others.

But there is also another point of view which considers racism a modern idea without much historical precedent and represents the opinion that racism is still present within the society either hidden or in some cultures even obvious.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to tell which of these is the right opinion and it is also demanding task to define racism. But as usually the case is, the truth can be probably found somewhere in between. G.M.Frederickson expresses the base of racism. He described it as „not merely an attitude or set of beliefs“<sup>3</sup> but what is more important, racism expresses itself „in the practices, institutions, and structures that a sense of deep difference justifies or validates“<sup>4</sup>.

The causes of racial differences had been an issue for speculation since the mid-fifteenth century when Europeans started to think that black colour of skin is inferior to white. But it was not untill the nineteenth century when the theory of polygenism has appeared which declared that racial types has been created separately and therefore are distinct and not equal.<sup>5</sup>

So racism is not just a theory that describes and sums up human differences or has a bad estimation of a group which is not controlled. It is more, I would call it vigorous. Racist regime directly proposes to establish „a racial order - a permanent group hierarchy“<sup>6</sup>. To gather it up I

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2 Lentin, Alana. *Race, Racism, Anti-Racism: Challenging contemporary classifications*.

3 Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.5

4 Ibid

5 JACKSON, John P. a Nadine M. WEIDMAN. *Race, Racism and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*. p.29

6 Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.5

would like to quote Frederickson once more: „Racism in this sense is neither a given of human social existence, a universal “consciousness of kind,“ nor simply a modern theory that biology determines history and culture.“<sup>7</sup> This means that we still do not have the clear definition of what racism really is. But I do not consider that the vital part. Let us settle for explaining the main principle which is denial of the possibility that „the racializers and the racialized can coexist in the same society, except perhaps on the basis of domination and subordination“<sup>8</sup>. I assume that this is clear enough for the beginning and that dealing with the manifestations and forms of racism will take us closer to its meaning.

Now I will concentrate on a specific kind of racism – ethnocentric dislike towards African-Americans. This attitude is based on hatred for people with black skin which has no rational roots. And this gets us down to the question which is important to be answered – where do the roots of racism lie? What were the initial impulses that gave a birth to such an ideology?

The first thing which is vital to realize is, that it was not a sudden thing to happen. It came slowly and furtively. Generations of people started to accept it in little pieces, this ideology crowded into society and in this way, it became easier to accept it and it appeared to ones consciousness as standard attitude. If it had been sudden, if it had happened from one day to another, there would have probably been something like a wave of repulsion, people would refuse to accept anything similar to Jim Crow laws<sup>9</sup> if it came bolt from the blue. I would compare it to a sudden death of a loved person. If a tragedy happens, it is very difficult to accept it and to come to terms with the new situation. But consider that it is someone terminally ill. Then we would maybe accept it little by little every day, we would learn to live with that fact and we would prepare ourselves to such a hardship. It would become a part of our life and it would definitely be easier to cope with it when it comes. There would perhaps be no state of shock and no phase of denial. This may sound

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7 Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.6

8 Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.9

9 Jim Crow laws = laws that enforced racial segregation in the South America between 1877 and 1950. Any contact between blacks and whites was prevented, the separation was required in public transportation and school, later also in parks, cemeteries, theatres, and restaurants. ( encyclopedia britannica – on-line)

cynical but I think that it has lots of similarities. People started to accept it slowly, that black skin is somehow worse than white, that black people should be from some reason subordinate to whites, that it would be quite comfortable to have a cook, gardener, chauffer or any other „help“ without obligation to pay for it etc.

Another main source of misunderstanding was the theory of permanent racial types<sup>10</sup>. This distinction was based on the theory of *difference* and as we will see further, the belief in permanent difference was the starting point to everything.

For better orientation some concrete dates should be involved. Generally accepted definition is that racism as such originated in the eighteenth or nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> But here I would like to point out to the opinion of George M. Frederickson. According to him it – at least its prototypical form – originated in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and was originally related to religion. There was the opinion present that every human has characteristic talents inherited as a member of a concrete race and that the differences between humans, animals and even plants were caused by God and that later on there was an unequal development within human societies. Additional question was raised when the common descent and origin of all people was impeached. The main dispute was if all humans are descended from Adam and Eve which was connected to events narrated in the Bible. The variety of races was also explained on the grounds of biblical story that describes human's attempt to build the tower of Babel and they were scattered all over the world. But the supporters of that theory came with no satisfying explanation of why would God create different and unequal races so it satisfied only few people.<sup>12</sup>

The first signs of a racist view of the world can be traced in the identification of the Jews with the devil and witchcraft. Then native Europeans started to encounter people with darker pigmentation from Africa, Asia, and the native Americans. It was in the period of the Renaissance and Reformation.

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10 Banton, M: *Racial theories*, p.3

11 Ibid

12 Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.78

But it is interesting how that attitude occurred and what was the excuse for making such a negative judgement about people with dark skin. There had to be some elements present to evoke such an idea that anyone should be submissive to someone else. I fully agree with the statement of G.M. Frederickson that these components are *difference* and *power*. It originates from an attitude that “they” are different from “us” in ways that are permanent.<sup>13</sup> Another component can be *progress* and *science*. The scientists believed that the whole world went through a natural process of development while Africans and American Indians did not because they remained primitive and backward.<sup>14</sup> The sense of difference and development provided one of the rationales for using the power to treat diverse people badly. But there were more motives and excuses for doing so.

The official rationale for enslaving Africans was that they were heathens. So as I have already mentioned before it was religion. But knowing what racism means this would not be enough. Religious persecutions were aimed at people for what they believed but within the racist regime it was different. It is a different kind of hatred. They persecuted other human beings for what they intrinsically are. Another blind spot in this excuse is that the racist hatred was established on the differences that are unbridgeable. But any heathen can be atoned through baptism.<sup>15</sup>

The situation changed in 1677 when Virginia declared that converted slaves could be kept in bondage, not because they were actual heathens but because they had heathen ancestry. This means that the apology for keeping blacks in subjection changed from religious status to something approaching race. In the first half of the nineteenth century it was common to refer to the three main groups of the population as whites, negroes and Indians.<sup>16</sup> Later on new laws were adopted in English North America which forbade marriages between whites and blacks. The subject moved in a different direction in the eighteenth century. The topic of religion and heathens stopped being important and the theme of unity of the human race appeared. It became even worse in the

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13 Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.9

14 JACKSON, John P. and Nadine M. WEIDMAN. *Race, Racism and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*. p.22

15 Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.6

16 Ibid

nineteenth century, when the darwinism gained its popularity. It was mainly because of its emphasis on the struggle for existence and concern for the survival of the fittest. This helped to develop new and more trusted scientific racism which pictured race relations like something questionable, uncertain and made it a space for conflict. The word *racism* first came into common usage in the 1930s when a new word was required to describe the theories on which the Nazis based their persecution of the Jews.<sup>17</sup>

The climax of the history of racism came in the twentieth century. This was the era of the boom of racist regimes. It was not only in the American South, it was present also in Germany where Jews suffered and in Asia. But this thesis focuses on the situation in America. Racial segregation laws entered into force and black voting rights were also restricted. Denying black men the right to vote was the first step of taking away their civil rights.<sup>18</sup> It was an important step which can be seen from the pronouncement of Frederick Douglass: „Slavery is not abolished until the black man has the ballot.“<sup>19</sup> This could have no other effect than making everybody feel that African Americans have lowered caste status. Another step leading to hatred towards blacks was propaganda, which represented black males as perverse and sadistic men craving for white women. It was a well-known fact later, that a rape was the most common pretence for putting a black man into a jail. Another reason for being racist appeared hand in hand with these unfair accusations. It was a fear of sexual contamination through raping or intermarriage. This was very similar to Nazi Germany and their racist regime because it was afflicted with the same obsession, with the race purity.<sup>20</sup>

One more rationale for the systematic exclusion of black Americans from southern public society was that it was for their own protection.

But slowly the situation has changed for the better. It became a crime to import or export

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17 Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.108

18 JACKSON, John P. a Nadine M. WEIDMAN. *Race, Racism and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*.

19 BLIGHT, David W. *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*, p.191

20 Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.2

slaves in 1808. In 1861 eleven slave states broke away to form the Confederate States of America which led to the American Civil War. In 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation was accepted which meant that slaves were freed by President Abraham Lincoln in the rebellious Southern states. During the Reconstruction period of 1865–1877 freedmen (former slaves) from the U.S. South were provided with civil rights protection. In the 1870s White Democrats had regained political power and legislated so called Jim Crow laws. They were enacted between 1876 – 1965 and originated from Black Codes and from segregation on railroad cars which had existed before a war. These laws were segregating black people from whites. Blacks were prevented from buying homes in certain neighbourhoods, from shopping or working in certain stores, from working at certain trades etc. These laws had far reaching effects. African-Americans were segregated from schools, restaurants, restrooms and even public transportation. Even though the laws had a status of „separate but equal“, they caused many disadvantages and bad treating to blacks. The disadvantages displayed for example at education. Schools for black children were consistently underfunded compared to schools for white children. And there were many more.<sup>21</sup>

I would like to quote few Jim Crow laws, to make it more factual for a reader. The first law which prohibited marriage between blacks and whites is from the state of Colorado:

*„1908: Miscegenation [Statute] Marriage between Negroes and mulattoes, and whites prohibited. Penalties: Punishable by imprisonment from three months to two years, or a fine of between \$50 to \$500. Performing a marriage ceremony punishable by a fine of \$50 to \$500, or three months to two years' imprisonment, or both.“<sup>22</sup>*

Another one is from Tennessee, 1891:

*„All railroads carrying passengers in the state (other than street railroads) shall provide equal*

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<sup>21</sup> Frederickson, G: *Racism; A Short History*, p.80

<sup>22</sup> Separate is not equal: *Brown v. Board of Education*. *National Museum of American History [online]*

*but separate accommodations for the white and colored races, by providing two or more passenger cars for each passenger train, or by dividing the cars by a partition, so as to secure separate accommodations.”*<sup>23</sup>

The turning point was winning the case *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The *Brown* decision declared the system of legal segregation unconstitutional. But it took a long time and a lot of hurdles. When blacks asked courts to help protect their rights for the first time, U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racially separate facilities, if equal, did not violate the Constitution. So according to the Court segregation was not discrimination. But they did not give up and started a huge, decades-long campaign. It was led by two institutions - the Howard University School of Law and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP focused on five major areas: anti-lynching legislation, voter participation, employment, due to process under the law, and education.

The NAACP's Washington helped to advance integration of the armed forces in 1948, passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1964, and 1968 and also the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These were quite huge progresses in their campaign and fight for freedom. Another partial achievement was the integration of major league baseball by Jackie Robinson in 1947. In 1963 about 250,000 Americans of all races joined together in Washington D.C., to stand firm against racial injustice. Martin Luther King's famous speech "I have a dream" sounded there. He was a leader of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In the speech he expressed the hopes of racial harmony for all Americans.<sup>24</sup>

Fifty years after the *Brown* decision, the movement began to fight for a social justice and it included racial and ethnic minorities, women, people with disabilities, and other groups, each demanding equal opportunity. It was a long and painful struggle but it had its results. The USA gradually cleared itself from legalised racism, segregation and discrimination of blacks sheltered by the law.

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<sup>23</sup> Separate is not equal: *Brown v. Board of Education*. *National Museum of American History* [online]

<sup>24</sup> NAACP. *NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* [online]

But it is still not perfect. For instance school segregation continues even today in many regions. Some city school systems also begun to focus on economic and class segregation rather than racial segregation.<sup>25</sup>

I consider it respectfull to mention at least some of the most influential people who were fighting for freedom. They were for example Homer Plessy, President Johnson, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson or Charles Hamilton Houston.<sup>26</sup>

So the historical agency of black people should not be denied. They were not just passive objects and helpless victims as often described, even in anti-racist novels. They had sruggled against the oppression and it was them who had been the central actors in the movements for freedom and justice. They were fighting for their liberation and they should be accredited with that.

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25 NAACP. *NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* [online]

26 JACKSON, John P. a Nadine M. WEIDMAN. *Race, Racism and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*.

### 3. THE FORMS OF RACISM

In this chapter I would like to deal with the types of racism. The most basic ones are racism of inclusion and racism of exclusion. The first version allows the two races to be connected but only if a firm and exact hierarchy is established. This hierarchy would again be based on the belief that there are permanent, unbridgeable differences between these groups. The exclusionary version is worse. It does not find any way how the groups could coexist within the same society.<sup>27</sup>

The French sociologist Pierre-André Taguieff distinguishes more types of racism and he described the racist representing each type and his characteristics. He also proposed the ways a particular type of racism can be fought. The first one is the ignorant racist. In this case education and right upbringing could help. This is connected with a pedagogical approach that the differences should be taught and made known and liked. There would be no space for differences become dangerous. The next type is very similar to the first one and it is the ill-bred racist. He had a poor upbringing, he is prejudiced and stereotyped. These people must be reeducated to think, to speak and to behave. It is also important to teach human beings not to judge what is different from us. Another type is the wicked racist. This is not just a lack of knowledge, this is based on negative feelings, on hatred. The way to keep these from doing harm is to isolate them, exclude them. The third type is the mad racist and it is probably the most dangerous and difficult to fight. It is in a certain way a mentally ill person. The last type is the racist as a social symptom. This type differs from the others because the racist here is just a victim of dysfunctional society. The most common scheme is socialist-communist regime. The solution lies in the complete transformation of the society which of course is not easy if not impossible.<sup>28</sup>

It would be very nice if the racists and their ideologies could be fought the same way in practice as in the theory. But even though we can benefit from democratic society nowadays, it is still not the case that we can say the racism does not exist and that all people are equal. Even though racism does not have full and explicit support of the state and the law discrimination by institutions

<sup>27</sup> Banton, M: *Racial theories*, p.15

<sup>28</sup> Taguieff, Pierre-Andre. *On Antiracism*

and individuals against racially different still persists and the interpretation of the Constitution and its application to minority rights still continues to be controversial. Some more examples can be found in several European countries in the attitude towards newcomers from the Third World. They are usually discriminated. This is called a new cultural racism.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> FREDRICKSON, George. *Racism : a short history*. p.4

## 4. HARPER LEE

A reader has already been acquainted with the meaning and forms of racism. I will concentrate on particular authors and their novels in the following chapters. These are the authors who were interested in the issue of racism, slavery and oppression and who described it in their novels. Their life will be introduced briefly and the novels will be analysed afterwards.

### 4.1 Biography

Harper Lee was born in Monroeville in 1926. Her nickname was Nelle and she was the youngest of four children. Her father was Robert E. Lee, a lawyer and the Southern Civil War general. Her mother was Frances Cunningham Finch Lee. Harper was white but she was affected by the history of slavery as will be seen later. Lee pursued a law degree at the University of Alabama and later on she was well known at the University of Alabama campus as an editor of the politically satirical student newspaper. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the only novel she wrote.<sup>30</sup>

### 4.2 Parallels between Harper Lee's life and the novel

There are some features in the novel that are drawn from Harper Lee's life. The first obvious connection is the last name of the main characters. Finch was the maiden name of Lee's mother. The setting is also drawn from real life. Harper Lee was from Alabama and she studied law at the University of Alabama. This can also be a reason why she chose to write a story whose plot very often takes place in the court and that the main character is a lawyer too. Harper was a lawyer herself as well as was her father who defended black men accused of crimes, so she had an inspiring background and she surely knew what she was writing about.<sup>31</sup>

Several of the characters were also inspired by her real life. The boy, Dill, who was coming to his aunt every holiday was drawn from Truman Capote who was Lee's childhood friend. She also accompanied him to Kansas, as a research assistant for Capote's classic 'non-fiction' novel *In Cold Blood*. Lee, like Scout, also had a brother four years older.<sup>32</sup>

Also Radley's family is probably not as fictitious as it can seem. There was one

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<sup>30</sup> Biography. *Harper Lee biography* [online]

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

family's house directly across the street from the home where Lee grew up. The family of Boulars lived there, the house was "boarded up and falling down" and those who lived in Lee's neighbourhood remember that there was a mysterious inhabitant named Sonny Boular who obviously became the model for Boo Radley.<sup>33</sup>

Harper Lee was inspired to write this novel by real events. For example the accusation and conviction of Tom Robinson was based on a real court case called Scottsboro Trials. Nine young black men in age from 13 to 20 were falsely accused of raping two white women. And as well as Tom Robinson they were sentenced to death without real evidences. The trail was appealed because of help from the American Communist Party. Later some of the death sentences were reduced to life in prison, some boys were paroled. But one of the defendants was actually shot in the head after attacking a deputy sheriff in an escape attempt. So he faced the same fate as Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who was also shot while tried to escape from a prison.<sup>34</sup>

One more parallel can be seen between Tom's and Scottsboro trial. The word of an African American against white woman meant nothing. One of the defendants was actually shot in the head after attacking a deputy sheriff in an escape attempt. So he faced the same fate as Tom Robinson.<sup>35</sup>

Another legal case influenced Lee when writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was the Emmett Till murder case from 1955. He was a fourteen-year-old boy who visited his uncle in Mississippi. The whole crime he had committed was that he said „Bye baby“ to a white woman in the store who was a wife of the store owner. Emmet's body was found few days later. Roy Bryant, the owner of the store and his brother-in-law J.W. Milam lynched him and killed him. His body was so defeatured that it was difficult to identify it. The two men were accused, the case was opened but they were never sentenced. They were found „not guilty“ despite the huge courage displayed by Emmet's uncle and some other blacks who ventured to testify against the two

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33 BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's guides: Harper Lee's To kill a mockingbird.*, p. 12

34 Famous American Trials. LINDER, Douglas O. *The trials of the "Scottsborro Boys"* [online]

35 Ibid

defendants. But it did not make a difference. The jurors listened to defense attorney John C. Whitten who told them: „Your fathers will turn over in their graves if Milam and Bryant are found guilty and I'm sure that every last Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to free these men in the face of that outside pressure."<sup>36</sup> But this case at least attracted national attention and it helped to start the movement for civil rights for black Americans.<sup>37</sup>

## **4.3 To Kill a Mockingbird**

### **4.3.1 Historical context**

Harper Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* during the beginning of the Civil Rights era. The book is set in Maycomb, Alabama, in the period from 1933 to 1935.<sup>38</sup>

The social situation was following. It was not easy to be black at that times. Although African Americans were freed, they were not slaves any more the past was still strongly alive. It was only sixty-five years from the enforcement of Emancipation Proclamation. Prejudice and racial discrimination were still present in majority of states and blacks were treated as second-class citizens. Jim Crows laws were active which meant that blacks were segregated from whites. This also caused inequality and another manifestations of discrimination. There was also a widespread belief that African-American men were sexually dangerous to white women. As will be mentioned later they were unfairly accused of rape many times. The common situation was that many white men lived with black women but it was unthinkable for a black man to live with a white woman. Another specific sign of the era when *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written is that the African Americans did not have equal access to voting, education and employment opportunities yet.<sup>39</sup>

*The economical situation* also was not satisfactory. It was a state of economic decline. The situation was very difficult, most of the country inhabitants faced poverty. It was caused by the

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36 The Murder of Emmett Till. *Watson.org* [online]

37 Famous American Trials. LINDER, Douglas O. *The Emmett Till Murder Trial: An Account* [online]

38 Shmoop Editorial Team. "To Kill a Mockingbird" *Shmoop.com*.

39 RAMSDEN, Kevin. The "New Negro": A Study of the Changing Social, Economic and Political Status of the African-American in the Early 20 th Century. 2002.

Great Depression in the United States that led to a collapse of the economy. People lost jobs, marriages broke down, banks failed, people became homeless, people got depressed and many people were hungry. But the Southern states were the worst affected because they were mainly rural and agricultural. Many white farmers became bankrupt. The situation is nicely described by the words of Scout, the narrator of the novel. She cited her father who described the situation: „ Atticus said professional people were poor because the farmers were poor. As Maycomb County was farm country, nickels and dimes were hard to come by for doctors and dentist and lawyers...The acres not entailed were mortgaged to the hilt and the little cash he made went to interest.“<sup>40</sup> Atticus also spoke about a farmer Cunningham who had no money to pay him so he paid with what he had. There were also huge differences in incomes between the rich and the poor. This resulted in not enough people buying goods and services to keep the economy in a healthy state.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Summary

For the introduction of the novel I would like to use the quote from San Francisco Examiner. I consider the commentary very apposite. They wrote that Miss Lee wonderfully builds the tranquil atmosphere of her Southern town and caused to erupt a shocking lava of emotions.<sup>42</sup>And this is exactly the feature of the novel that captured me. I felt like I was there in Maycomb with all the inhabitants and I was going through the emotions that they felt while watching Tom Robinson’s trial.

To start from the beginning I would like to introduce the main characters. Atticus Finch, who is a lawyer and father of two is very strong personality with stable morals. What attracted me to him most was that he is the kind of man who stands up for what is right even when the costs are high. Even though his children found him weak at the beginning and they felt he cannot do anything they could be proud of, later on, within the process of growing up they started to recognize how

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40 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.21

41 MAROTOUS, George. *To Kill a Mockingbird: The Great Depression*. [online].

42 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*

strong their father is not only for being 'the dearest shot in Maycomb'<sup>43</sup> in the past but mainly for his courage, rightness and honour. The character of Atticus made me feel safe and stable.

Atticus' children were Scout and Jem. Jem was four years older than Scout. They both were very perceptive and adventurous children with the sense for justice. Scout, who is the narrator of the novel, spends most of her time with her brother and with their friend Dill who comes every holiday to visit them. She wants to be treated like a boy and she feels a strong dislike towards the world of women.

Calpurnia is a black woman who works in the house of Atticus as a cook. But she means much more for them. She has a huge influence on the children and she is doing her best to show them the right path.

Another important character is aunt Alexandra who is Atticus's sister. Scout compared her to Mount Everest - „throughout my early life she was cold and there.“<sup>44</sup> She moved to live with them later and she tried to make Scout a little lady.

Basically, it is the story of a six-year-old girl Scout who is confronting prejudice and racist attitudes. The novel starts with various adventures of Scout, Jem and Dill who are fascinated by Radley's house. They consider it haunted because Radleys rarely go outside and nobody knows much about them. They are sort of outsiders and the children are afraid of them in the beginning just because they are different.

The second part of the book is mainly Tom Robinson's story. He is a black man falsely accused of raping a poor white woman Mayella Ewell. Atticus is his lawyer and he defends him despite the fact that almost whole racist white community in Maycomb is against him. It does not end happily because he does not win the case and Tom is shot seventeen times when he tried to escape from a prison but the whole trial meant a lot and it was a little step towards the equal treatment of blacks.

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43 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.98

44 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.98

But it does not end for Atticus and his family. The father of Mayella Bob Ewell, whom Atticus accused of being a liar and humiliated in the court, vows revenge. He attacked Scout and Jem and tried to kill them. But Boo Radley saved them and killed Bob. That was an important lesson for Scout because it helped her to practice sympathy and understanding and taught her that she should never judge people who are different from her. Boo Radley finally became a human being to her.

One more think I like about the novel is, that it suggests that racism is learned, so it can be unlearned.<sup>45</sup> It means that racist attitudes are just artificially created and stereotyped thinking which can be wiped out.

### 4.3.3 Setting

The novel is set in the fictional small Southern town of Maycomb in Alabama in the 1930s. It is described as an ancient, tired, old town where was no hurry and where a day seemed longer than twenty-four hours. People move slowly there and took their time about everything. It was very quiet, conservative neighbourhood with the same families living there for decades. I think that Harper Lee managed to portray the atmosphere of the town in one sentence: „There was no hurry for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County.“<sup>46</sup>

Another description of the surrounding where the novel takes place is provided by Harper Lee. „There are no clearly defined seasons in South Alabama; summer drifts into autumn, and autumn is sometimes never followed by winter, but turns to a days-old spring that melts into summer again.“<sup>47</sup> An interesting point is that it has not snowed in Maycomb County since 1885, but that winter it was so much snow that Scout and Jem could not go to school. I will deal with the symbolism of that in latter chapters because this snow was a foreshadowing of events to come.

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45 BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*

46 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.5

47 Ibid p.59

Most of the time the action of the novel takes place outside in the urban areas, many times also in the Atticus's house and later on also in the jail and the court. A reader will surely appreciate that there are no too long descriptions but the atmosphere and the image of the town can be still very lively conceived.

#### **4.3.4 Narrator, point of view**

The narrator of the novel is Scout, Atticus's daughter. She narrates the story in the first person, describing what she saw, heard and experienced and she narrates some events retrospectively from the point of view of an adult who is able to look back on the events and when she is already able to understand them.

It is very interesting for the reader to watch Scout growing up and mature. I consider it a good choice to have a child as a narrator. She can see many things that an adult would not notice or even if he would he would not regard them worth mentioning. Scout also masters to point out the features of a human's nature that are already hidden to an eye of an adult and she comments on them honestly and humorously. Scout mostly tells her own thoughts but also analyses Jem's thoughts and actions.

#### **4.3.5 Language**

The language of the novel is most of the time standard and easy to understand. But there are so called 'nigger talks' in some passages, spoken by African Americans and representing their culture and language. The language which blacks used and the situations in which they used it, portrays the stereotypical generalizations which demeans African Americans as people.

The language used in several passages of the novel, for example through the character of Calpurnia, can seem as a language used in earlier times, but the truth is that it is still widely used today.<sup>48</sup> I would like to provide a reader with some examples to enable him or her to identify with the culture and nature of blacks more. For example when Calpurnia took the children into blacks'

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48 BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*

church, this is how she talked with another black woman: „I wants to know why you bringin' white chillun to nigger church...They's my comp'ny...Yeah, and I reckon you's comp'ny at the Finch house durin' the week...“<sup>49</sup> A reader can notice that these sentences are usually not correct; in different example a wrong word order or double negative can be found. But this is how they talk and it just enriches the novel and adds to its authenticity.

Another observation would point to the usage of the word 'nigger.' Some critics consider it politically incorrect and abusive and despite that it is used 48 times in the novel.<sup>50</sup> But Harper Lee did not use it to abuse anyone, she just wanted her novel to sound real and persuasively.

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49 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.119

50 *To Kill a Mockingbird*. *Dangerous books* [online].

## 5. TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

### 5.1 Racist attitudes

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is unarguably a bestseller, it won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and sold over fifteen million copies.<sup>51</sup> Therefore I will not question its quality or popularity, I would rather analyse its themes, morals and contributions to every each of us.

Regarding the theme of racism, there are two main theories. One of them declares that the novel takes a powerful stand against racism while the second opinion articulates that it represents African-Americans as manageable, simple folk and passive victims who needed whites to protect them and that it is actually just kinder and gentler form of racism.<sup>52</sup> I think that there are elements in the novel representing a little of each approach. On one hand Atticus represents anti-racist stands and tries to protect blacks, on the other hand, ways in which African Americans are presented unfavourably and patronisingly can be detected in the novel. Harper Lee was accused of presenting racist thinking several times. I would like to investigate it now.

The deprecatory and offending attitude towards blacks was still present in the Southern society at the time the novel is set. Although African Americans were not slaves any more, the past was still strongly alive and a reader can feel it throughout the whole book. The main character Atticus was also aware of this attitude and commented on it: „Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don't pretend to understand...“<sup>53</sup> He was afraid that one day, whites will pay the bill for it.

There were more hints in the novel that made a reader aware of the racist attitude of whites towards blacks and of blacks' position in the society. For example calling a grown black man a “boy” automatically degrades him and put him into inferior position to whites. Even Atticus called Tom a boy, even though he was a grown married man with three children. On the other hand

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51 1961 Winners. COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY. *The Pulitzer Prizes* [online]

52 Shmoop Editorial Team. "To Kill a Mockingbird" *Shmoop.com*.

53 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.88

nineteen-year-old girl Mayella, who was irresponsible, untruthful and immature was called a “woman” because she was white, which means she was treated with honour.

The contempt for blacks was most revealed in the episode of Tom Robinson’s trial. He was depicted as a humble Negro who was not clever enough and who was depending upon Atticus’s help, which was not very complimentary picture. After cross-examining him, there were several commentaries like: „After all he’s *just* a Negro“<sup>54</sup> etc. I think that it is clear how much Negroes were appreciated from this sentence . As the novel depicts, whenever a Negro was accused of any crime it was automatically presumed that he was guilty. Atticuse’s words used in the trial proves it: „...The only thing we’ve got is a black man’s word against the Ewell’s...The jury couldn’t possibly be expected to take Tom Robinson’s word against the Ewell’s.“<sup>55</sup>

Atticus knew about the disadvantaged position of blacks and he did not hesitate to represent his anti-racist attitudes and use it in his closing statement. He pointed out to the jurors, that Bob and Mayella have presented themselves to the court in the cynical confidence that their statement would not be doubted, confident that the jurors would believe them on the evil assumption that „all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around white women.“<sup>56</sup>

The verdict had been given even before the trial started and it was because Tom was black. Despite the fact that he was innocent and that he was respectable, honest, hardworking, and loving father and husband, the woman whose family was lazy, ignorant, and despicable was trusted more just because she was white. But personal qualities did not play any role, only skin color did. Even Tom Robinson knew it himself. That is why he run away from Mayella’s house after the accident even though it was a sign of guilt. He knew that if his case would be prosecuted he will have no chances to be trusted that he did not rape Mayella. According to his own words, it was not

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54 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.199

55 Ibid p.88

56 Ibid p.204

safe for any 'nigger' to be in a situation like that.<sup>57</sup>

The epitome of a racist white man is probably the character of Bob Ewell, Mayella's father. He is the villain of the novel, even his very name suggests evil. Ewell was a drunken, lazy man who beat his daughter and probably also raped her. He hated blacks and he felt no remorse for false accusation of Tom for raping his daughter. He did not have a guilty conscience even after Tom's death. He still was not satisfied and he troubled and scared Tom's wife. Ewell's hate went to such an extent that he tried to kill Scout and Jem to take revenge on Atticus. But he was stabbed to death himself so at least he paid for his deeds.

There were more characters with hatred towards blacks. One of them was also Atticus's neighbour Mrs. Dubose, who went so far that when the children went to school, she often yelled at them. She told them once: „Your father's no better than the niggers and trash he works for!“<sup>58</sup> I think it is sad that a grown up woman is capable of such a behaviour.

The real, unflattering racist nature of Maycomb's inhabitants was shown off also at the end of Tom's case. He was shot, which I did not expect as a reader and which aroused many emotions in me. I had a sense of horrible injustice and helplessness. But it did not touch the people of Maycomb at all. Maycomb was interested by the news of Tom's death for about two days. And Harper Lee has described black people in an unflattering way again. She commented on Tom's death as typical for Maycomb. She stated that it was typical of a 'nigger' to cut and run. That it was typical to 'nigger's' mentality to have no plan, no thought for the future, that they just run blind first chance they saw. But it is necessary to think about the reasons for their behaviour and consider what was behind that. Blacks had almost no choices, there was no justice for them so what else could they do? Lee wrote: “You know how they are. Easy come, easy go...When it comes down to the line veneer's mighty thin, nigger always comes out in them.”<sup>59</sup>

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57 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.198

58 Ibid p.102

59 Ibid p. 240

## 5.2 Anti-racist attitudes

There are characters in the novel who decided to take an action on the side of justice and were determined to fight for equality, even though their effort was mostly useless. And it is also significant moral of the book - that doing something to make life a little more fair is worthwhile and what is more, admirable. It is the same with Tom Robinson's case. Everybody knew that he will not win the case and that he will be sentenced. But Atticus, his lawyer, tried to save him. He was appointed to defend Tom Robinson and he aimed to do it in spite of the society's aversion and he did gain a little victory. He had number of reasons for defending Tom and he had explained some of them to Scout: "The main one (reason) is, if I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something."<sup>60</sup> Even though it was not easy for him and he "had hoped to get through life without case of this kind,"<sup>61</sup> Atticus knew that if he did not stand for what was right, he would not be able to respect himself. So he did it partly for himself, but mostly for Tom and a whole black community.

The exhausting lawsuit may seem meaningless, but there was a small victory which was hidden in the fact that the jury were out for a long time while deciding about the verdict. According to the inhabitants of Maycomb, if there was any other attorney, the verdict would be passed in a few minutes. Atticus at least made them think and forced them to consider all circumstances. Even though the jurors were not brave enough to free Tom, it was a step, although just a baby-step, towards the equality and justice. And Atticus knew it and understood it. He tried to explain this unfairness and injustice to his son Jem: "There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads – they couldn't be fair if they tried. In our courts, when it's a white man's word against black man's, the white man always wins. They're ugly, but those are the facts of life."<sup>62</sup>

Even though those are the facts of life, Atticus did not tell that we should give up and accept them as right! He gave his son one more precious lesson:

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60 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.75

61 Ibid p.88

62 Ibid p.220

“As you grow older, you’ll see the white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don’t forget it – whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is a trash...There’s nothing more sickening than a low-grade white man who’ll take advantage of a Negro’s ignorance.”<sup>63</sup>

Harper Lee also implies the equality of blacks and whites by calling a black cook Calpurnia a lady, the same term which was used for naming white Maycomb’s women of a good manners and by pronouncing Tom Robinson’s manners as good as those of Atticus.<sup>64</sup>

Atticus Finch is the most anti-racialistic character of the book. He, as a defense attorney of Tom, could have felt the pressure of racist society personally because he sympathized with blacks and tried to help them. Atticus was abusively called nigger-lover and his children were laughed at at school every day. Atticus Finch did not just talk about helping and respecting blacks, he really acted. Atticus went so far that he saved Tom from lynching. It happened when Tom was in a jail and the crowd of white men came for him. They wanted Atticus to give Tom up to them to deal with him as they considered appropriate. But Atticus opposed, demonstrated his courage and did not let the men to do any harm to Tom. However, this act has unfortunately no historical foundation. This brave deed is not inspired by a real-life story. There was an exhibition in New York called *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* and it documented more than 600 incidents of lynching. It is sad that, within two years of investigation, researchers did not find any single case when a white man would stop or at least try to stop lynching. .<sup>65</sup>

Another character from the novel that tried to help Tom Robinson, even though he did not do it as openly and obviously as Atticus, was the judge Taylor. He could not influence the jurors and the trial directly so he used other means. It was the common case in Maycomb that when a black man has been accused of any crime, Maxwell Green was his court-appointed defender. He

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63 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.195

64 Ibid p.195

65 BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom’s guides: Harper Lee’s To kill a mockingbird.*, p. 61

should have had also Tom Robinson's case and it was not accidental that judge Taylor appointed Atticus instead. He knew that Atticus was the best lawyer and the only person who had any chances to impress and influence the jurors.<sup>66</sup>

There were more Tom's supporters in the novel – his 'coloured friends'<sup>67</sup> - Miss Maudie who was rather passive spectator but who approved of Atticus's deeds; Mr. Link Deas who stood up for Tom in the court by announcing that Tom was working for him for eight years and he had not a "speck of trouble"<sup>68</sup> with him. Mr. Deas was also the only person who helped Tom's wife Helen and offered her his protection and job after Tom's death. Mr. Heck Tate, the Maycomb County sheriff, tried to protect Tom by telling Atticus about the dangers of keeping Tom in the Maycomb County jail. He did not want Tom to be lynched by local mob. The sheriff proved to be an honest and upstanding man also at the end of the novel, when he protected Boo Radley who saved Scout and Jem from Bob Ewell.

Even though Maycomb was still racist, prejudiced and segregated county; righteous and open-minded people could always be found there. This is how Harper Lee, as well as the other authors that I deal with in this thesis, offers the solution and perspective for the future. Mutual understanding, empathy, respect and love are powerful wizards and can help to overcome racism.

### **5.3 Attitudes of blacks towards whites**

The issue of blacks' attitude towards whites is not analysed or pictured in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* to such an extent as in the other two novels that are analysed in this thesis. The reason for it is that the narrator of *Mockingbird* is a white person, which means that a reader does not obtain direct thoughts of the black character Tom. There are just a few references to this issue in the book but it can help to enlighten the situation of that time and relationship between the two races.

The first occasion in which the feelings of blacks for whites were demonstrated, was

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66 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.215

67 Ibid p.215

68 Ibid p.195

when Calpurnia took the children, Scout and Jem, to the black church. One of Calpurnia's friends, Lula, made it very clear that the children's presence was undesirable there. She wanted to know why Calpurnia would bring white children to *their* African church; she mentioned Calpurnia's status in Atticus's house and reminded her that she was just an employee there. Lula tried to treat whites in the same way they treated blacks.<sup>69</sup>

Tom also knew how the blacks are regarded and he did not feel comfortable in whites' presence. He knew that they hated him, wanted to lynch him and were not willing to consider the idea that he did not ravish and beat Mayella. Until the accident, Tom tried to live his life and not to mind the business of whites.

Blacks were aware of their social position but their attitude towards whites was not filled with such a hatred as in the novel *Native Son*. But there were no positive emotions either. They just wanted to be left alone and they tried not to get involved with whites. There were two separate worlds and blacks wanted to keep it that way.

#### **5.4 The effect of racism and the guilt of society**

The point of view and the situation within the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is quite different from the one in the novels *Native Son* and *Beloved*. It is narrated from the point of view of a little *white* girl Scout which means that the reader is not provided with an insight into the black's soul. He or she will never know how *Tom*, the victim of the racism and injustice, felt. But we can at least assume that from the overall atmosphere.

The first main nuance of this novel is that Tom was really innocent. Unlike Bigger, he had not committed the crime he was accused of, he had nothing to hide. Tom was actually respectable Negro and he was „the only person who has ever been decent to Mayella,<sup>70</sup> his alleged victim. But despite that he was charged of rape and violence and he died. How did it happen? Bad

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69 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.119

70 Ibid p.204

circumstances and a lie got him to the court. But if there was everything all right in the society he would be discharged and released. But it was not. The society and its prejudice and segregation was once again to be blamed for what happened. Tom was in Mayella's house when she tempted him. When her father saw them, all the three of them knew that it was bad. Tom run away simply because he was afraid and knew, from the very first moment that nobody would ever believe him his explanation of what had really happened. Mayella knew that she would be judged for „tempting a Negro“<sup>71</sup> because it was unspeakable for a white girl to kiss a black man at that times. If the racist attitudes had not been still alive, the jurors would have never pled Tom guilty, Mayella would not have been so ashamed and she would not have lied and falsely accused man would not have forfeited his life. But nobody cared because „what was one Negro , more or less, among two hundred of them?“<sup>72</sup>

Even though slaves had already been freed several years ago, the minds of people had not. They still considered blacks low-graded and African Americans still did not have the same rights and opportunities. These were the effects of racism which can be felt from the book. Blacks had lived in the vail of fear and disconnection. For example Calpurnia, Atticus's black cook, rarely commented on the ways of white people. She knew that she was not supposed to mind their business. Tom also did not like to be in Mayella's presence and in her house out of fear from other people's thoughts.

The hypocrisy of the society was appositely described by Mrs. Merriweather, a minor character from the book. She and her friends were discussing Tom and blacks generally: „At least we don't have that sin on our shoulders down here. People up there set them free, but you don't see them setting at the table with them. At least we don't have the deceit to say to them yes you are as good as we are but stay away from us.“<sup>73</sup>

But fortunately, Harper Lee gives a reader a spark of hope. There are people fighting for

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71 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p.204

72 Ibid p.235

73 Ibid p.234

justice and equality and they will always be here. New generation with the sense for righteousness is growing up, having such admirable fathers as was Atticus. People should be concerned with other human beings surrounding them more, no matter what their skin colour is.

## 6. RICHARD WRIGHT

### 6.1 Biography

Richard Wright was born in 1908. His father, Nathaniel Wright, was illiterate and his mother was a schoolteacher named Ella Wilson. They lived in Arkansas and Richard wrote that nothing green ever grew in the yard where their house was. They moved to Mississippi then and lived in the heart of the local Black Belt. Richard had quite complicated childhood because his father left them and his mother became a paralytic. So he was moving from school to school and from relative to relative.<sup>74</sup>

### 6.2 Parallels between Richard Wright's life and the novel

Richard had many personal experiences of how blacks are oppressed and discriminated. Wright's reasons for writing such a novel were deep and intimate. I really appreciate that he made an extra effort and wrote *An autobiographical sketch* and also an excellent Introduction to the novel *Native Son*, called *How Bigger was born*. I find both of these very useful and helpful to understand better not only the novel itself but also the circumstances and background of that times and reasons why Wright wrote it. Another reason why I am astonished by this novel is that he did not just take an inspiration from other people's life and experiences, he was affected by Jim Crow laws himself and he had to deal with the racial prejudice in person. This helped him to capture and create Bigger who seems to reader like a real person with his feelings, attitudes and experiences.<sup>75</sup>

Richard Wright explained that the idea of Bigger goes back to his childhood. He knew many „Biggers“ who were generally black males consistently violating the Jim Crow laws and they were getting away with it. But not for a long time. Eventually, the whites made them pay for it – they were shot, hanged, maimed and lynched until they were dead or at least their spirits broken. Wright described five basic types of „Bigger“. The first of them used to terrorize him and all the boys he was playing with. This Bigger was strong and it was typical for him that he always took *his*

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<sup>74</sup> Biography. *Richard Wright biography* [online]

<sup>75</sup> RAYSON, Ann. *Richard Wright's Life. Modern American Poetry* [online]

way - right or wrong. Bigger number two did not direct his cruelty to blacks but towards the whites who ruled the South. He did not pay for food and clothes and he ended up in prison. The next Bigger called „bad nigger“ by whites, was killed during the days of Prohibition- he was shot by a white policeman. The fourth Bigger’s only law was death. He used to violate all the taboos and his mood was always swinging between happiness and depression. He was sent to the mental institution for insanity. The last Bigger number five dared to sit in a streetcar in the section labeled ‘FOR WHITES’. Not even the conductor made him leave.<sup>76</sup>

All these „Biggers“ left an impression on Wright because he probably „longed secretly to be like them and was afraid.“<sup>77</sup> Even though these blacks did not end up well and they paid the price for their deeds, they were brave and not afraid to oppose the whites and their laws and to fight against discrimination and segregation in their own ways. Wright admired them because they were the only Negroes who were not scared to rebel. The rest of them was passive as Richard Wright mentioned: „I can tell you that I lived the first seventeen years of my life in the South without so much as hearing of or seeing one act of rebellion from Negro, save the Bigger Thomases.“<sup>78</sup>

Wright was writing according to „his own hopes and fears, what he had learned and remembered.“<sup>79</sup> And I think that personal involvement helps to create an exquisite work. Richard Wright needed it as a kind of therapy for recovering from all psychological harms caused by racism. He admitted that he wrote the novel not only for others to read it but to exempt *himself* from the sense of shame and fear.<sup>80</sup>

There were more reasons why Wright had decided to write the novel and to picture the situation and position of blacks in the racist and segregated society. He explained some of them in his *Autobiographical Sketch*. The first negative encounter with whites dates back to his childhood when he was beaten by white boys. The next and more serious experience was from his first job in

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76 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*. Introduction p. IX

77 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, Introduction p.IX

78 Ibid

79 Ibid

80 Ibid

optical company. Two white colleagues of Richard beaten him and forced him to leave just because he did not call one of them Mr. Pease but just Pease.<sup>81</sup>

Richard Wright had many more experiences like that and he called it his „Jim Crow education.“<sup>82</sup> He learnt that he can never address the white man without using *Mr* or *Sir* and that he should not ever be seen in a white neighbourhood after the sunset. He could live quite undisturbed then.

Another interesting fact is that he became a public activist and joined the Communist Party in 1933.<sup>83</sup> So in the course of writing the novel *Native Son* and describing Jan and his communist friends, he also knew all the facts at first hand.

## 6.3 *Native Son*

### 6.3.1 Historical context

For better understanding of the novel it is necessary to place it in a historical context and to be familiar with Wright's personal reasons for writing it. The story is set in Chicago in 1930s which means that it is the same time and the same political and economical situation as in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. American racial discrimination and segregation previous to the Civil Rights Movement is reflected in the novel. The main protagonist protests against the blindness of the society. The whole community was blind to what was going on around them. Blacks were still oppressed and had to live separately at that times which caused many disadvantages. For example Bigger had to live in one tiny room with his mother, sister and brother which creates a strong contrast to huge Dalton's house where Bigger works. The blacks were still poor while whites were rich.<sup>84</sup>

The treatment of blacks was very scandalous at that times. Wright mentioned another

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81 WRIGHT, Richard. The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch. *American Stuff: Work from the Federal Writers Project* [online].

82 WRIGHT, Richard. The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch. *American Stuff: Work from the Federal Writers Project* [online].

83 ANDERSON, George Parker. *American modernism 1914-1945: Research guide to American literature*. p.271

84 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*

disturbing feature. It was not unusual that a black boy was picked up on the street and accused of rape. He was carted off to jail and sentenced without any evidences. It was happening so often that, according to Wright, it became “a representative symbol of the Negro’s uncertain position in America.”<sup>85</sup>

### 6.3.2 Summary

The main character of the novel is Bigger. I have already cleared up Wright’s reasons for writing this novel and I have also explained where his inspiration for Bigger came from, so now, when a reader is already familiarized with ‘how Bigger was born,’ I will write about ‘what is Bigger like’ and what is the whole novel about. One more thing that should be emphasized is Wright’s own perception of the novel and of its plot. He stated that he had not thought about the plot very much, because „what had made him (Bigger) and what he meant“<sup>86</sup> constituted the plot. And this is exactly how a reader will feel about the book. Bigger’s troubled and not easy to understand nature is largely the plot itself.

Regarding Bigger’s nature, his mother characterized him as hot tempered. He had been in troubles many times and he refused to obey whites, he is very proud. Wright wrote that Bigger lived his life dangerously and took his life into his hands<sup>87</sup> but I do not entirely agree with that. As a reader goes through the novel, it gradually appears to him or her that Bigger is rather a victim of unfortunate circumstances and prejudiced, stereotyped society than an active director of his life.

Bigger is quite complicated personality and his life was defined by periods of abstract dreaming and periods of intense desire which manifested themselves with states of indifference and violence. Wright used charming and apposite metaphor to describe him: „He (Bigger) was like a strange plant blooming in the day and wilting at night; but the sun that made it bloom and the cold darkness that made it wilt were never seen.“<sup>88</sup>

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85 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, Introduction

86 Ibid

87 Ibid

88 Ibid

Bigger's whole life seems like a big struggle to me. He tried to survive in the world which he feared; where he had almost no chances and where he felt ruled by others – whites. Bigger made a lot of mistakes and yes, he committed a horrible crime. But his behaviour can be understood in a certain way. He acted on the deep fear and hatred which has been enrooted in him ever since; on the deep sense of exclusion and on the sense of injustice and later on also on shame and guilt.

Particular stages of his life are described in the novel. It is appositely divided into the three main parts. The first one is called *Fear* and it narrates very significant day for Bigger, when he moved from the tiny room where he had lived with his mother, sister and brother to the huge house of Dalton's family where he got a job as a chauffeur. The first night out, with the Daltons' daughter Mary and her Communist boyfriend Jan Erlone, ended in tragedy when Bigger, caught in Mary's room killed her for fear of being discovered by her blind mother Mrs. Dalton.<sup>89</sup>

In the second book, called *Flight*, Bigger's feeling after killing Mary are described and also what happened next. There was no sense of guilt or remorse in Bigger. Exact the opposite. He felt freer than ever before and he gained new sense of power. So he sent a ransom note to the Daltons in which he wrote that Mary had been kidnapped. But the murder was revealed before he could get the money, so he ran away. But all his plans went wrong, he killed his black girlfriend Bessie and was caught. Bigger tried to bring an accusation of Mary's murder on Jan and the Communist Party.

The last book called *Fate* focuses on Bigger's trial and especially on his Communist lawyer, Boris Max, who tried to help Bigger and argued for the social causes of Bigger's crimes. There are many significant speeches of Max in the novel, through which Wright protested against injustice and prejudice and through which he manifested his own attitudes and opinions. Buckley's arguments for death sentence are also depicted there. He was a state attorney and he wanted to prove that Bigger was guilty.<sup>90</sup>

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89 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p.86

90 Ibid

### 6.3.3 Setting

The novel is set in Chicago in 1930s. The first part of the book takes place mostly within the space of Black Belt where Bigger lived. Later on he got also to white neighbourhood, and the action takes place both inside the Daltons house and outside in the streets.

It is important for a reader to have an image of the neighbourhood and of the conditions in which Bigger had to live. Chicago was huge, roaring, dirty and noisy, it was a city of extremes and diversities.<sup>91</sup> The huge contrast between his tiny, crowded apartment and Dalton's big house has already been mentioned. But there were more outrageous differences and downsides of the life in Black Belt. Wright described it precisely:

„...there are two worlds, the white world and the black world, and they are physically separated. There are white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white businesses and black businesses, white graveyards and black graveyards, and, for all I know, a white God and a black God...“<sup>92</sup>

This is how the place, where Bigger grew up and where the novel makes the scene, looks like. No wonder he felt excluded and not connected to either one of the worlds.

### 6.3.4 Narrator, point of view

The story is narrated in a third-person voice which focuses on Bigger Thomas's thoughts and feelings and is told from Bigger's perspective. The narrator tries to draw a reader close to Bigger, make him or her understand his feelings, state of mind and situation.

The sentences are not too long and they are catching and evocative. Despite not too many descriptions and boring theses, the novel still handles to deliver the important message about social protest, through the speeches of some characters for instance those of Max.

I think that the person who is able to provide us with the most accurate explanation of what the purpose of his writing was and how it was planned to deliver it to the reader, is the author

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91 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, Introduction p. XI

92 Ibid

himself. Wright had enlightened his intentions: „I tried to make the reader *feel* cold, and not just tell about it...“<sup>93</sup> He wanted to write a book over which no one would weep, it should have been *hard* and *deep*.

The stream of consciousness is also used several times in the novel, then monologues and depictions of Bigger’s thoughts. Wright tried to write a well-constructed book and create Bigger’s story which would be real and credible and I think he completed his task well.<sup>94</sup>

### 6.3.5 Language

The concept of a language in the novel *Native Son* is very similar to the one in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Standard English is usually used, some dialect appears sporadically. The dialect is used when a black person speaks. Wright’s method for creating a speech of a black person is worth mentioning. He usually wrote standard English speech and then changed the spelling to produce dialect. The example can be taken from the speech of reverend Hammond:

<sup>aw</sup> Lord Jesus, turn <sup>y</sup> your eyes and look with mercy upon us sinners.  
<sup>l</sup> Look into <sup>er</sup> the heart of this poer lost boy. <sup>Yuh</sup> ~~Ye~~ said that mercy  
<sup>uz</sup> was always Yours.  
<sup>e i</sup> Ferget everything but your fate son.

<sup>95</sup>The usage of the dialect refreshes the novel and makes it more real.

93 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, Introduction p. XXXI

94 ANDERSON, George Parker. *American modernism 1914-1945: Research guide to American literature*.

95 KINNAMON, Keneth. *New Essays on Native Son*. p.8

## 7. NATIVE SON

### 7.1 Racist attitudes

Several manifestations of racist behaviour can be noticed in the novel. The first description appears right in the introduction. Richard Wright pictured the feelings of blacks and *their* perception of racism and racist attitudes of whites. He was an eligible person to do it, because he did undergo all sufferings personally since he was black and oppressed himself; he knew best how his people felt. He concentrated on the emotions of blacks and on their attitude towards 'white America'<sup>96</sup> and towards the world of whites. I consider it very useful view of that times because blacks were those who were oppressed and their opinion matters. They can provide us with the information about real conditions in which they had to live and they can depict the displays of racist behaviour. I do not confide in testimony of whites so much because they did not experience it personally and they always tried to find some excuse for their behaviour towards blacks.

The society pictured in the novel, was still very racist, which can be drawn from another fact: whites controlled everything - the labor, legal, religious, educational and social institutions and they dictated where and how a black man can live – some houses were not to be sold or rented to blacks, as illustrated in the novel, blacks could only rent an apartment in the Black Belt<sup>97</sup>. Whites were also the ones to decide where blacks can work or go to school and what they can or cannot do with their lives. Bigger, the main protagonist of the novel, expressed himself:

“They (the white folks) don't let us do nothing...I just can't get used to it. I swear to God I can't. I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the

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<sup>96</sup> WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, introduction

<sup>97</sup> WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p. 25

fence...’’<sup>98</sup>

This was a spectacular description of Bigger’s feelings. Richard Wright managed to grasp the exact words needed for describing Bigger’s sense of exclusion, his fear and hatred towards whites and his hopelessness. Wright also interpreted the reasons for Bigger’s feelings. He was depressed and angry because he had nothing and could not do anything. A metaphor was used, that ‘whites are in his stomach’<sup>99</sup>. That is because a stomach is the place where a person can sense his feelings. And the worst thing about it was that whites were once again the ones who controlled even these emotions, because they controlled his whole life.

One of the most obvious effects of racism was blacks’ deep sense of exclusion which was also the main problem of Bigger. They did not feel like belonging into the society nor did they have an option to leave. Blacks did not consider anything really theirs and they did not regard anything from the world of whites as a part of their own lives or culture. They did not identify with any creations of whites despite the fact that they lived in the same environment and they were surrounded by the same things. Wright compared it to the feelings of Gorky and Lenin in exile. Lenin said Gorky as they were walking down the London street: “Here is *their* Big Ben.” “There is *their* Westminster Abbey.” “There is *their* library.”<sup>100</sup> The deep sense of exclusion can be felt again.

Another thing that seemed unfair to Bigger and which was clearly a manifestation of racism, is the fact that some jobs were dedicated only to whites. Bigger expressed his dream to be an aviator but only whites were allowed to be ones. Or when Bigger went to watch the movie with his friends, a reader can notice that whites were always depicted as wealthy and sophisticated, while blacks were presented as savages in the movies. Bigger was accusing people around him of being blind. For instance both Mr. Dalton and Mrs. Dalton were blinded by their wealth, Bigger's mother was blinded by her religious beliefs, Jan by his ignorance and other whites by their backgrounds

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<sup>98</sup> WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p. 21

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, introduction

which entailed them to believe that they were superior to African Americans and they considered them less than humans.<sup>101</sup>

It seems like everything Bigger has done had a relationship to the colour of his skin. It is mentioned several times that he hated his black skin, that he was aware of a shame it was bringing and it was all because whites were superior to them. The protagonist felt like whites lived in his stomach as already mentioned above. Bigger was “very conscious of his black skin...and there were men who had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin.”<sup>102</sup>

The racist attitudes of society can be also seen later, when Bigger was on trial already. There was nothing like justice, the decision was made even before policemen caught him because his skin was black. Nothing else had mattered.

## **7.2 Anti-racist attitudes**

This novel is anti-racist from its grounds. Its overall message is about racism affecting and destroying people and it emphasizes that everyone should fight against it. There are several people in the novel who did it and who were brave enough to publicly oppose to those who had supported racist attitudes and who had oppressed blacks.

The first character in the book supporting these ideals was Mr. Dalton and his wife. He was a millionaire and his way of helping blacks was through money. The first day of Bigger’s visit in the Daltons house, Bigger learnt that Mr. Dalton had donated more than five million dollars to African Americans. He also bought many ping pong tables for black boys later on. Another way Mr. Dalton tried to compensate for the wrongs committed on blacks by whites, was by trying to help them to get good education and job.<sup>103</sup>

It can seem like an enormously generous deed because of those millions, but from my point of view, the Daltons did very little indeed. Mr. Dalton did offer Bigger quite a big salary but

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101 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, introduction

102 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p. 69

103 Ibid p. 58

he did not do what would really help. He was the owner of the South Side Real Estate Company where was also Bigger's home. He and his family had to pay unfairly high rent and even though the whole company belonged to Mr. Dalton, he did nothing about it. He was too worried about his reputation among rich whites. The acts of kindness demonstrated by Mr. Dalton were actually useless and they were just attempts to feel less guilty about deep-seated racial prejudices.<sup>104</sup>

It was a similar case with Mrs. Dalton. No matter how good-hearted she was and how much she tried to support blacks in various ways, she did not hold them in esteem and she did not consider them equal to herself. It was clear from the conversation between her and Bigger after Mary's disappearance. She was ashamed to exhibit her real feelings in front of Bigger and he knew it: "...after all, he was black and she was white, he was poor and she was rich. She would be ashamed to let him think that something was so wrong in her family that she had to ask him, a black servant..."<sup>105</sup>

Another character who has probably really honestly despised racism and tried to profess it was Dalton's daughter Mary. She felt for the oppressed ones and she wanted to do something to help them. But she was helpless facing the masses of white people who hated both blacks and honest whites who tried to help the oppressed ones. Mary said in front of Bigger: "When I see what they've done to those people (blacks), it makes me so mad...and I feel so helpless and useless, I want to do something..."<sup>106</sup> But one can take a valuable lesson from Mary's story. One individual is usually helpless. She approached Bigger, she treated him equally, she "responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she."<sup>107</sup> And she paid for it with her life. I expected Bigger to appreciate it, to like Mary. But he had reacted in the opposite way - he was confused and he hated her. What a white man regards as kindness does not have to seem kind to a black man at all. These are the consequences of racism and I think that no one who did not experience it

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104 AYAN, Meryem. *The cultural logic of racism in Richard Wright's Native Son*.

105 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p. 21

106 Ibid p. 78

107 Ibid p. 67

personally would be able to understand. Bigger tried to explain his feelings to his lawyer Max. He told him that he knew nothing about that woman (Mary), but that white people kill blacks for women like her. “We live apart...She was rich...She and her kind say black folks are dogs... White folks and black folks is strangers. Maybe she was trying to be kind, but she didn’t act like it. To me she looked and acted like all other white folks.”<sup>108</sup>

Jan, Mary’s communist friend, received similar reaction. But he was very passionate about fighting racism and he honestly did his best to help Bigger. Jan was a member of The Communist Party and he, together with his friends, was organizing demonstrations against racism. This was a brave thing to do, because all of them turned into the objects of hatred and contempt. Jan also tried to treat Bigger as an equal member of society. He offered him to shake hands, told him not to say sir to him and invited Bigger to eat with him and Mary publicly. He had shown his good intentions even in the most difficult situation – after Mary’s slaughter and his stay in jail. Bigger had falsely accused him and despite that, Jan still wanted to help him. Jan was finally able to realize how blind he was after that experience. He realized now what he had not noticed before – that Bigger hated him and that the whole friendly and respectful treatment made him feel suspense, filled him with dread and feelings of dumb, cold, and inarticulated hate.<sup>109</sup> Bigger considered white people’s deeds of kindness as something to be afraid of rather than to be pleased. He was also kind of racist in his attitude towards whites. His concept of them was very negative and he did not distinguish any individuals and he was not willing to admit that anyone could have been different. Bigger’s effort to frame Jan also emphasizes the ironic influence of racial logic on Bigger, which was to deprive him of his potential friends.<sup>110</sup>

Jan proved his exceptionally good heart and also his awareness of blacks’ mentality and position. He knew that Bigger had very little choices in his life and that he was raised not to trust any white person. Jan was actually capable of forgiving Bigger the murder of his loved one because

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<sup>108</sup>WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*,p.341

<sup>109</sup> Ibid p. 69

<sup>110</sup> AYAN, Meryem. *The cultural logic of racism in Richard Wright's Native Son*. p.136

he reminded himself how many black men have been killed or snatched into the slavery. He was not holding Bigger guilty for what he had done, he blamed the society. Due to this behaviour, a white man became a human being for Bigger for the first time in his life.<sup>111</sup>

Another significantly anti-racist character was Max, a lawyer from the Labor Defenders. He represented Bigger in the court, he honestly tried to save him even though he knew somewhere inside that it was not possible. But he wanted to do it because even though he knew that Bigger was guilty, he was convinced that white men made him who he was, that the whole society was responsible and he was determined to make people understand why Bigger acted in the way he did.<sup>112</sup> I think that a comparison to Atticus from the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be made. He was the same kind of a lawyer, they had many things in common. The both of them were brave, honest, honorable and determined. And as well as Atticus, Max also knew that the verdict had already been made even before the process started, but he did not give up Bigger's life without a fight. He knew that no one would believe Bigger and that the jurors would not commute his sentence. But Max's aim was not to win the case but to show people that something was wrong in the society and that they should be no longer blind to it, otherwise it would lead to many more such crimes as committed by Bigger.<sup>113</sup>

### **7.3 Attitudes of blacks towards whites**

It is mentioned in the novel *Native Son* several times, that blacks despised and hated whites as well as whites despised blacks. It was a form of racism too, with the only difference that it was just internal. The blacks were not able to demonstrate their hatred practically because they had no powers. But they were thinking about whites even more than were whites thinking about blacks.

If blacks had the necessary powers and opportunities to organize the world according to their feelings I think it would have similar displays. Bigger thought that whites should also

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111 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p. 281

112 Ibid p. 285

113 Ibid p. 285

experience the segregation, disadvantages and oppression. He expressed himself once that it was good that whites did not let them work as aviators, because he would just crash into anything with the plane and kill all of them.<sup>114</sup> The whites were not human beings to him, he did not make any differences between them. There were no individuals for him. To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people, they were “a sort of great natural force.”<sup>115</sup> He hated them and the main reason for feeling this way was that he was not allowed to live his life in the way *he* wanted. They ruled his life and as Wright described, “...his hate towards the whites, for he felt that they ruled him, even when they were far away and not thinking of him, ruled him by conditioning him in his relations to his own people.”<sup>116</sup>

Bigger wanted to get rid of the constant sense of fear and shame. But he did not know how, he did not know how should he prove to be as smart and competent as whites are and that if he had the same chances he would accomplish as many successes as they did.

Further display of blacks’ relationship with whites is obvious from one particular situation when Bigger went to white neighbourhood. He had to take his knife and his gun. He did not use it for his protection but it helped him to feel equal to them, it gave him a sense of completeness. It is sad that he needed a weapon to feel more powerful and less inferior. He was also aware of the fact that it was not very safe for a black man to be in a white neighbourhood on his own because of the frequent cases of molestation. Whenever a black man was seen there it was thought that he tried to rob or rape someone.<sup>117</sup>

The situation at the time had already been described in the introductory chapters. A reader already knows that blacks lived separately and that there were only some districts in the city reserved for them. So when Bigger went to the white neighbourhood for the first time it was something new and unknown for him. He expected to feel there like he has felt many times before

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114 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p. 18

115 Ibid p.113

116 Ibid p.323

117 Ibid p. 44

while watching the movies about rich and fancy white people living in beautiful houses. I, as a reader, also expected Bigger to be amazed and astonished by the houses and cultivated environment and to feel a strong desire to live, or at least work there. But the reality was the contrary. It was cold and distant world for him and all he felt was fear and emptiness, it intimidated him. It was not his world and he thought that “he had been foolish in thinking that he would have like it.”<sup>118</sup> When he entered Dalton’s house he felt very nervous, anxious and uncomfortable and later on even angry. The conscious of his black skin came to him even more urgently while being among white people. At one time he even hated himself because he was not sure how he should act in the company of rich white people and he hated them for it likewise.<sup>119</sup>

I was convinced that Bigger stored up these negative feelings for whites who had humiliated him or treated him in a wrong way. But it was not entirely true. When Jan, the white friend of Mary, approached him, offered him a hand to shook and invited him to eat with them, Bigger hated him for that. Jan had just good intentions and he wanted to become a friend with Bigger, but it made Bigger feel trapped, puzzled and angry. He did not like it because it was very unusual for whites to shake hands or eat with blacks at that time. In addition to it, Jan told him not to call him sir. This was unthinkable for Bigger to call a white man by his first name. He also knew that when he was in the company of whites, everyone was staring at them and his black friends would judge him for socializing with white people. It was inappropriate and considered a betrayal of his own people.<sup>120</sup>

To sum this up, blacks hated whites and the other way round. There were these negative feelings on both sides. Wright has shown that although Bigger was of an oppressed race and the whites were members of an oppressing race, both lived in fear. There were just different reasons for it. The famous American psychologist Robert Guthrie dealt with this issue and he named the

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118 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p.47

119 Ibid p. 47

120 Ibid p. 68

whites' phobia "guilt-hate-fear complex" and the blacks' phobia "fear-hate-fear complex"<sup>121</sup> Whites hated blacks, but felt guilty for it and feared them at the same time. Blacks hated whites and feared them too. Both, whites and blacks, were responsible for prejudiced and stereotyped racist views, either directly or indirectly.<sup>122</sup>

#### **7.4 The effect of racism and the guilt of society**

The effect of racism on mentality of people is *Native Son's* underlying theme. The novel warns against dangerous psychological effects of racial oppression upon humanity. Every individual had suffered from racism in some way. All blacks were missing what is fundamental for every human being in his or her life. It can be called 'esprit de corps,' which is a feeling of belonging, solidarity, inclusion, pride and respect that everybody needs.<sup>123</sup> Blacks had none of these. Wright described the life of blacks, and particularly Bigger's life, as 'hovering unwanted between two worlds – between powerful America and his own stunted place in life.'<sup>124</sup> Everything that blacks yearned for, was 'a life beyond that world, a life in which the colour of men's skin would not matter, a life in which each man would know what was deep down in the hearts of his fellow man.'<sup>125</sup> These are really beautiful words and I think Wright used them because he desired for such a life himself.

The main issue that Wright deals with is the guilt of society and the effect of racism on the oppressed people. It had been mentioned several times in the novel that Bigger was a product of dislocated American society. It was not entirely his fault that he killed Mary and Bessie. The circumstances forced him to do it. If the whole society have been different it would probably never happen. He was just looking for a way out for his whole life.

Another indicator of Bigger's damaged and affected mentality and conscious was that he did

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121 GUTHRIE, Robert. *Being Black: psychological-sociological dilemmas*. p.58

122 YAN, Meryem. *The cultural logic of racism in Richard Wright's Native Son*, p.138

123 The Free Dictionary. FARLEX. [online].

124 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, Introduction

125 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, Introduction

not feel any guilt after killing Mary.<sup>126</sup> He simply did not feel any remorse because he did not consider her a human being and he believed that it was actually her fault that he killed her because she did not behave suitably. He felt even proud sometimes because of the murder and he considered it a personal revenge on all whites who had ever treated him badly.

This is how severely racism affected Bigger's humanity. He actually felt the urge to stand in the middle of the street and shout; tell the whites that he had killed a rich white girl whose family they knew, he wanted to experience the thrill of shocking and frightening them.<sup>127</sup>

Bigger definitely was psychologically damaged, his dreams were so spoiled and his human sensibilities so negligible that he had no sense of compassion, which was obvious from his behaviour and state of mind. But the question is *why* and whose fault it was. The damage which was caused him has its reasons. And the reasons are constant racist propaganda and racial oppression which he faced while growing up. Bigger was not born an enraged criminal. He was a "native son" - a product of American culture.<sup>128</sup> He was being prepared for the harsh life of a black man from his early childhood; he was absorbing the atmosphere which was present in the society for his whole life.

The guilt of society comes also from the lack of chances provided blacks and from not equal opportunities. Blacks were already disadvantaged when they were born. Bigger and his family had to live in horrible conditions. They shared one tiny room infested with rats, they had no money, they had to endure poverty and had little opportunities for education. They were so poor that they depended upon charity to eat. So Bigger's attitude towards whites was just a combination of powerful anger and powerful fear and I think that it is totally understandable. Living in a constant anger, helplessness and injustice can result in nothing else than hatred and violence. He perceived "whiteness" as something that ruled him and that was set against him. Wright described the society

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<sup>126</sup>WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p.129

<sup>127</sup> Ibid p.129

<sup>128</sup>WARNES, Andrew. *Richard Wright's Native Son*. p.40

that gave birth to Bigger in a broader sense as one that contained “no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him and had left him stranded...”<sup>129</sup>

Throughout the novel, Wright illustrates the ways in which white racism forces blacks into dangerous states of mind. When Bigger killed Mary it did not seem like something unreal to him. He said that he has always known that something like that would happen to him. He had killed so many times in his mind before that when it really happened, it seemed natural to Bigger. Wright described his feelings: “He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstances to make visible or dramatic his will to kill...he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like that.”<sup>130</sup>

So Bigger had committed a crime as a result of racial hatred, which only increased the racism in American society because it confirmed racist whites that they were right to fear blacks. And it became a vicious circle. Wright emphasized this double effect of racism and explained that whites transformed blacks into their own negative stereotypes.<sup>131</sup>

It is worth noticing that blacks were not just unconscious victims acting without being aware of their position. They knew how they were regarded in the eyes of whites and it made it even worse. Bigger realized why he felt the way he did and why he hated white people too. He said: “I couldn’t help it...Maybe I would’ve been all right if I could have done something I wanted to do. I wouldn’t be scared then. Or mad, maybe. I wouldn’t be always hating folks; and maybe I’d feel at home, sort of.”<sup>132</sup> Later on he explained to Max: “I didn’t want to kill! But what I killed for, I am! It must’ve been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder...”<sup>133</sup>

The same interesting observation can be made from Max’s words about whites. White

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129 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, Introduction p. XIX

130 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p.105

131 GREEN, Laura. *Stereotypes: Negative Racial Stereotypes and Their Effect on Attitudes Toward African-Americans*. [on-line]

132 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p.346

133 Ibid p.412

people were also not unaware of the effects of racism and they knew black people were angry and unhappy. Max told Bigger that there was an “ocean of hot hate” against him, because he had murdered Mary. But one of the reasons for white people’s anger was that deep down in them, they believed and knew that they made him do it.<sup>134</sup>

If a reader meditates on this issue for a little longer, he or she can understand that not only Bigger’s anger, lifetime hatred and vicious attitude towards whites had its roots in racist treatment, but also the very deed of killing had. If blacks were not generally regarded as animalistic beasts hungering for white women, Bigger would not be so afraid of being in one room with a white girl. But he knew that his mere presence in her room was offensive and he was too scared that Mrs. Dalton would find him there. He knew that he would be accused of raping her or at least wanting to; nobody would believe him that his intentions were good and that he just tried to help her because she was so drunk she could barely walk.

Racism did not affect only individuals’ bowels, it had also a great impact on their mutual relationships. Even though the slavery was already over, the effects and scars were still carried on by every African American in his body and mind. The oppression damaged Bigger’s relationship with his own people, it had split him off from them and he even hated them sometimes. He felt this way because black people were weak, poor and fearful in his eyes. He used to dream about some revolt; about making a stand against those whites who oppressed them; about having strong and determined black man who would excite and encourage all black people and they would act together and fight for equality and freedom. But his dream faded every time he looked at other black people close to him and he knew that this is probably never going to happen because they were too afraid. And he hated them and himself for it too.

People of Bigger’s race were permanent reminders of his black skin and of the shame which it meant. When Max asked him if he loved his people, Bigger was not able to answer. He

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134 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p.349

knew the boys like him and all of them had nothing and were not aiming anywhere, and the rich blacks seemed all the same as whites to him. Bigger was filled with distrust, he was very skeptical and suspicious about everyone. No wonder he felt that way; whites were usually not honest and blacks would do anything to survive and to save themselves.<sup>135</sup>

The feelings of distrust and suspicion were also the consequences of racist treatment. It has displayed itself in the most difficult moment of Bigger's life – when he was arrested and charged of murder. He wanted some help, he desperately needed to trust someone. But he was afraid, he had experienced disappointment and betrayal too many times already. Bigger was just too scared that his new belief in someone would end just as all other commitments of faith has.<sup>136</sup>

But fortunately the novel does offer a solution and hope. When Bigger drew closer to Max, he started to perceive whites as individuals, not just as stereotypes. Also Jan's behaviour helped Bigger to understand that white people were filled with fear themselves and Bigger felt that he may forgive them because they suffered the same ignorance that he has suffered.<sup>137</sup> The circle of racism can be broken once, because of sympathetic understanding between blacks and whites.

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135WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p.347

136WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, p.337

137AYAN, Meryem. *The cultural logic of racism in Richard Wright's Native Son*, p.138

## 8. TONI MORRISON

### 8.1 Biography

Toni Morrison is black American novelist who was born in 1931 in Ohio. She was the first black woman who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.<sup>138</sup> As she expressed herself, she had a happy childhood. She did not feel the consequences of the segregation very much and, as she stated, she was not treated menially. The probable reason is that her parents moved from the South to escape racism when she was a child to find better opportunities for all of them. She was the only black child in the class and she was the only one who could read. The love for reading, music and folklore was facilitated in her by her parents. Her father, George Wofford, worked as a welder and her mother, Ramah, was a housewife.<sup>139</sup>

Regarding her personal life, she married a Jamaican architect Harold Morrison and they had two children. But they had divorced six years later, due to cultural differences. Later on she worked as an editor and she also taught English.<sup>140</sup>

Morrison wrote several well known novels but *Beloved* is considered to be the best of them. According to her own words, she intended to write for people like her, which means for black people who are curious, demanding, people who can't be faked and who have very high criteria.<sup>141</sup> But even though she devoted her works to blacks, they appeal to readers of all races

### 8.2 *Beloved*

#### 8.2.1 Historical context

The novel *Beloved* is set after the American Civil War which took place from 1861 to 1865; exactly in 1873 with frequent flashback to the 1850s. It is inspired by political and economical situation of that times and also by real-life incidents. A knowledge of history helps the reader to appreciate the novel more. And even though mainly cruelties and sufferings of human beings are

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<sup>138</sup>BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: Toni Morrison's Beloved*. p.10

<sup>139</sup>Shmoop Editorial Team. "Beloved" *Shmoop.com*.

<sup>140</sup>Toni Morrison biography. *Bio. True stroy* [online].

<sup>141</sup>BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: Toni Morrison's Beloved*. p.9

pictured there, Morrison offered some hopes for the future and she believes that if whites and blacks joined their forces and work together they would create a beautiful future.<sup>142</sup>

The basis for the story was provided by an event that really happened. Toni Morrison's main character Sethe was inspired by an African-American slave, Margaret Garner, who tried to escape to Ohio, which was a free state, with 16 other slaves in 1856. It was before the Civil War when blacks had no rights yet. When they were running away, which was not easy - they had to cross a frozen river on foot and they had to use the Underground Railroads- a group of policemen and slave catchers found them and wanted to retrieve Margaret and her children. They had the right to do it because of the Fugitive Slave Act from 1850, which gave slave owners the right to chase slaves across state borders. Margaret killed her two-year-old daughter rather than giving her up for the life in slavery.<sup>143</sup>

The Fugitive Slave Act, passed in 1850 which was already mentioned, had a large impact on the novel. The purpose of the act was to "make it easier for slave owners to recapture runaways to the North."<sup>144</sup> If a slave escaped to the North he was automatically free but because of the Fugitive Slave Act they had to escape to Canada to be officially recognized by the government as free. The document that changed it was the Emancipation Proclamation passed in 1863 which proclaimed 'all those enslaved in Confederate territory to be forever free.'<sup>145</sup>

So the historical background of *Beloved* is reflected in many aspects in the novel. There are also many similarities between real-life cases and people, and those in the novel. Sethe, the main character of *Beloved*, is the same type of mother as Margaret. She protected her children even though the costs were too high.

There are more similarities between Margaret and Sethe, regarding appearance or age.

Margaret is described as "a mulatto, about five feet high... she appeared to be twenty-one or twenty-

<sup>142</sup>Interview with Toni Morrison. In: *NPR Books: Author interviews* [online]

<sup>143</sup>Margaret Garner Incident. *Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed* [online]

<sup>144</sup>The Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act. *Africans in America* [online]

<sup>145</sup>Ibid

three years old"<sup>146</sup> and she also had an old scar on the left side of the forehead and on the cheekbone. She said that it was caused by white man who struck her. Sethe was 19 or 20 in 1856. Her height also seems to match that of Margaret's. And Sethe's scars on her back, resembling a tree by its shape, were also caused by a white man.<sup>147</sup>

The character of Paul D was inspired by one of the 16 slaves who tried to escape with Margaret. His name was Robert and he endured a long way to freedom which can be compared to Paul's wandering.<sup>148</sup>

Another parallel with the real case of Margaret can be found within the topic of water. The ship carrying Margaret and her baby sank and the both of them were hurled into the river. Only Margaret was saved and the baby was drowned. Denver, the character from the novel *Beloved*, was born on a boat. The water is used quite frequently in *Beloved* as a symbol and it indicates deeper meaning.

### 8.2.2 Summary

*Beloved* is a true story about the history of African-American slavery. The interesting fact is that it does not only reflect the real conditions of blacks and a real situation of that time, it is based on the story that had really happened. The main character of Sethe is inspired by a black woman Margaret as I have already mentioned. Her motives for killing her daughter were the same as the ones of Sethe from the novel - she considered it better to kill her child than to expose her to the life in slavery.

The main character is Sethe, a former slave who was bearing the burden of killing her baby girl. The novel deals with her struggle for moving on from the past and accepting her freedom. Sethe lived in a house number 124 on Bluestone Road with her daughter Denver, mother-in-law Baby Suggs who died later and her two sons Howard and Buglar who ran away afterwards. So it

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<sup>146</sup>Margaret Garner Incident. *Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed* [online]

<sup>147</sup>MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*

<sup>148</sup>BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: Toni Morrison's Beloved*.

remained just the two of them – Sethe and Denver, and they had to live in a house which was haunted by the ghost of Sethe’s dead daughter.

The novel does not concern slave’s physical escape, as the most of traditional books about slavery do. It deals with the psychological state of the former slaves and with their way of surviving the psychological traumas caused by slavery and oppression.<sup>149</sup>

*Beloved* consists of three formal parts arranged into chapters. The first part begins with the visit of Paul D, who is a former slave as well as Sethe’s old friend, and it ends with his departure. It basically introduces the main themes of the novel, which are struggle with the past, motherhood, slavery and freedom. It also opens the topic of supernatural and the “tree” on Sethe’s back, which are the scars symbolising her suffering and traumas from the times of being a slave. Many cruel events had happened within the novel - mammary rape, a mother’s cutting of her baby’s throat, flagellation, dead, horrible prison treatment etc.

The second chapter reveals more about Sethe and Paul D’s past at Sweet Home, which was a plantation in Kentucky where they had been living and working as slaves, and it also describes the fatal forces of slavery. Denver is addressed further in the novel. She is Sethe’s daughter and she felt very lonely after Paul D’s arrival because her mother was suddenly not here just for her. Sethe and Paul were talking about the things from the past Denver knew nothing about. The novel also points out an interesting fact, that even though Denver was born free, she did not live a free life. She was enslaved by the isolation of the house and memories of her mother. It also indicates that the shame and traumas of slavery can be transferred from the parent on the child.<sup>150</sup>

During the course of further chapters, there was a tangle between Denver and Paul D. and Sethe became very protective. Paul believed that it was dangerous for a former slave to love too much. The climax of the novel came when Denver, Paul D, and Sethe returned from the carnival and found an exhausted woman sleeping on the stairs close to their house. She told them

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149 BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom’s Guides: Toni Morrison’s Beloved*. p. 16

150 Ibid

that her name was Beloved. She moved into the house and developed an obsessive attachment to Denver as well as to Sethe. She also controlled Paul D. by seducing him against his will. Gradually, Beloved grew abusive and manipulative, she was „consuming“ Sethe, so Denver decided to find help. She took responsibility for herself and her family and a progressive transformation into the strong and brave woman can be observed by a reader.

Beloved left in the end, Paul D was able to come to peace with his and also Sethe's past and Sethe lied on Baby Suggs's bed and felt like dying. But the fate of the three of them is still up in the air at the end of the novel. Mr Bodwin has put the house up for sale, which is a reminder that it did not belong to Sethe, Paul D and Denver and that there was still no such place like home for them. Even though slaves have been freed, they still did not have home ownership and even if they had, the most of them would not have funds to buy a house.<sup>151</sup>

But the end is not sad. It gives a hope for the future and illustrates the possibility of evolution of slaves into free men and women. It is also forwarding one important principle – the past has to be faced, otherwise a human being would not be able to ever recover from it.

### 8.2.3 Setting

The novel takes place during the period of Reconstruction in 1870 – 1890. It begins in 1873, which is eight years after the Civil War. Majority of the novel is set within the tiny house in 124 at the end of a country road. The setting of this novel is of much greater importance than in any other novel, not only because it bears so much symbolism, it is also because of the historical point of view - it was just a few years ago, when the state in which a black person lived, determined whether or not he or she was a slave or a free person. For example Kentucky, where was the plantation Sweet Home where Sethe and Paul D had spent the part of their life, was a slave state and Ohio, where Sethe had ran to 124 Bluestone Road, was a free state. And there was a huge difference between the two states even after the Civil War.<sup>152</sup>

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151BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: Toni Morrison's Beloved*. p. 16

152Shmoop Editorial Team. "Beloved Setting" *Shmoop.com*.

124 Bluestone Road was situated at the edge of Cincinnati which felt like the edge of the world. There were no other houses around it and the most specific thing about the house was that it was haunted.

An interesting observation can be made, regarding the gender of the inhabitants of the house who had lived there even before Baby Suggs moved in. 124 already had a history of its own. Mr. Bodwin, the owner of the house, mentioned that "women died there: his mother, grandmother, an aunt and an older sister before he was born"<sup>153</sup> Also Baby Suggs died there later on. But the house continued to be occupied by women. Sethe and Denver lived there and if that were not enough, even the ghost who possessed the house was of a female gender.

#### **8.2.4 Narrator, point of view**

*Beloved* does not follow a chronological plot but uses lots of circles from past to present and flashbacks. Concerning the narrator, Morrison doesn't stick to just one narrative style. She uses three main narrative perspectives - third person omniscient, third person limited omniscient, and straight-up first person.<sup>154</sup> But the majority of the book uses the first two styles.

The narrator seems like he or she knows everything and has a better perspective than the reader. Morrison uses the first person narrator in some passages of the book and it is not always easy for a reader to identify who is speaking because the characters do not name themselves.

*Beloved's* double narration can be also understood as a form of memory, because Sethe was recalling her memories and she was trying to cope with the past within the whole novel. The novel can be demanding for the reader but I think it is worth the effort.

#### **8.2.5 Language**

Toni Morrison made an interesting choice of words and sentence structures. Her choice of language and style of writing is very persuasive but I would sum her novel up as quite difficult to

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<sup>153</sup>MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*, p.137

<sup>154</sup> Shmoop Editorial Team. "Beloved" *Shmoop.com*.

read, especially for non native speakers.

Morrison exercises her readers' mind and imagination and she wants him or her to think about what he or she is reading. She uses the words which have generally an universal meaning but they change within the context. These words can help a reader to recognise which character is speaking, what gender is he or she and what region is he or she from. Morrison also often uses metaphors, for example when Sethe was not able to describe the murder of her daughter directly.<sup>155</sup>

She uses literal items to indicate abstract and symbolic issues. When she speaks about „pushing bussiness into the corner of the room“ she means letting her heavy burdens be and do not think about them.<sup>156</sup>

Another impressive method of making the story real is describing body language. Toni Morrison describes Sethe's movements and her way of self-expression, which draws a reader closer to her and enables him or her to understand Sethe better.

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<sup>155</sup> Analysis of the language used in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*. In: SHILOH, Brandy D. *Johnson C. Smith University* [online].

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*

## 9. BELOVED

### 9.1 Racist attitudes

The novel *Beloved* is about Sethe's and all blacks' fight with damages caused by slavery in general. These damages are both physical and psychological. The global theme is consistent with the one in the previous two novels but there are still some differences. *Beloved* does not deal with the racist attitudes so much and it does not deal with the relationship of whites and blacks. Its story's plot is mostly set within the black community and Toni Morrison concentrates on blacks' minds and troubles. So the reader's consciousness about racist attitudes is enriched mostly from Sethe's and Paul D's flashbacks and from the narratives of minor characters.

The first Sethe's memory deals with the terrors of slavery and describes her life in Kentucky on the plantation called Sweet Home. When the owner of the farm, Mr. Garner, died, Mrs. Garner's brother came to help her with the plantation. He was despotic, oppressive and he hated blacks. His nickname was schoolteacher and he was the reason why Sethe and the other slaves decided to run. All horrible events that happened on the farm took place under his supervision. Sethe's mammal rape, her flagellation and Paul D's sale.<sup>157</sup> The schoolteacher was the most brutal protagonist of a slave owner as I can imagine. He did not consider them humans and he had Sethe flagellated even though she was pregnant. Unfortunately, this was the common situation on all other farms in the period of slavery.

A horrible attitude towards black women was also illustrated in the novel. They were not regarded as women in the narrow sense, just as objects used for sexual practices and hard work. One of the protagonists who encountered such a behaviour was a minor character named Ella. She was held captive and sexually abused for almost a year by "white father and son who gave her a disgust for sex."<sup>158</sup> This is just another example how black women were treated.

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157 MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*, p.16

158 MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*, p.254

## **9.2 Anti-racist attitudes**

There were several characters with anti-racist attitudes in the novel too. They were white people brave and kind enough not to be afraid to help blacks, and clever enough to know that they were as much humans as whites were.

One of them was a minor character of a white girl, Amy Denver, who helped Sethe on her runaway. If it were not for her, Sethe's child would probably die and so would Sethe. Amy found her lying in the grass, still pregnant, she took care of her and the following day she delivered Sethe's child, who was named after Amy – Denver. Amy had some horrible experiences herself, she was a victim of abuse and have been locked in the basement once. So she was very compassionate and felt for Sethe's suffering.<sup>159</sup>

Another characters who were exceptions from the racist society were siblings Mr. and Miss Bodwin. They took a view that all people are equal and that every life is holy. They are described as white abolitionists and they were the ones who helped Sethe to be released from prison.<sup>160</sup> Even though the opinions about their politics differ and they are quite controversial characters, their intentions were generally good. They had helped not only to Sethe but also to Baby Suggs earlier, when they let her live in their house 124 on Bluestone Road.

It is very positive that there were always people willing to help those in need and not afraid to face up to those who were not so good-hearted.

## **9.3 Attitudes of blacks towards whites**

The encounters of blacks with whites were mostly on the grounds of slavery in the novel *Beloved*. Whites were either their owners and oppressors at the same time, or the ones who chased them. Later on also their employers. But there were very few positive experiences with them. Blacks felt mostly hatred towards white people, which is not surprising. For example the owner of the plantation, where Sethe and Paul D had worked, was very brutal and inhuman. Any human

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<sup>159</sup> MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*, p.61

<sup>160</sup>Ibid p.357

being could not possibly feel any other feelings towards him than hatred, disgust and fear. Almost all whites whom Sethe knew, like schoolteacher's nephews, slave-catchers, a sheriff and so on, were vicious and cynical.

All sorrows and bad memories which both Sethe and Paul D. tried to forget were caused by whites. Sethe was forced to kill her own baby for fear of the life that whites would create for Beloved. Paul D. had such painful scars on his soul that he had created a 'box' to lock all memories down. Halle, Sethe's husband, went insane because of whites and many other slaves who were Sethe's friend had died.<sup>161</sup> How could she possibly feel about them?

The most of blacks' feelings are unspoken in the novel but still can be felt from the atmosphere. They do not say it aloud because it is too painful, and there are things they do not say and questions they do not ask.<sup>162</sup> But they will never delete the horrors they endured under the rule of whites.

#### **9.4 The effect of racism and the guilt of society**

The novel *Beloved* offers a reader a deep insight into injured black man's soul. There are many passages dealing with the effects of racism on human beings and on their lives in the book. It focuses on both the individual characters and the historical impact of slavery.

I would like to start with the main character Sethe, a former slave. Not only had she physical scars as reminders of her suffering but also psychological ones which were far worse. She wanted to forget her past but the emotions have taken roots in her home, body and mind. No matter how much she wanted to live on or how long she lived in freedom, the past was with her every day.

One of the most dangerous effects of slavery is its negative impact on the people's sense of self. Slaves were treated like subhumans which caused that they were not able to appreciate their own value. As a result of this inability to believe in her own existence she felt depressed and tired

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<sup>161</sup>MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*, p.134

<sup>162</sup> MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*, p.92

very often. Slavery has also damaged the maternity in its real sense. Sethe did love her children but she thought that the best way to prove it was to kill them and thus protect them from even worse destruction caused by slavery. The degradation of motherhood was also symbolised by mammal rape, which had animalistic character and depicted Sethe just as procreative object.<sup>163</sup>

Another character whose emotions were badly damaged by slavery was Paul D., also an ex-slave. He was so estranged from himself that in one situation he could not tell whether the screaming he heard was his own or someone else's. He was also very insecure about his manhood and he still felt a need to prove it somehow to himself. One of the means were his attempts to beget a child. He would feel like a real man then. Another sorrow of Paul D was his uncertainty about his value as a person. He was also very emotional but he had developed his own strategy of coping with all these painful experiences. He had locked all his feelings, memories and emotions into "tin tobacco box" buried in his chest where a red heart used to be and he refused to love too intensely.<sup>164</sup> He even advised Sethe not to love her children too much because he knew how much it hurts when you lost your loved ones. It was very common in the times of slavery that families were torn apart, wives could not be with their husbands and children were not allowed to live with their parents.

Paul D's traumatic experiences also left behind a sense of humiliation. He told Sethe once, that schoolteacher, a master on the plantation in Sweet Home, had changed him. His cruel and humiliating manners caused that Paul D. felt like something else, like „something less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.“<sup>165</sup> These are very severe effects of racism which are not easy to cope with.

There are also other slaves mentioned in the novel, who endured horrible ordeals. They were minor characters but their fate was quite shocking for me as a reader. Jackson Till, Aunt Phyllis, and even Sethe's husband Halle, they all suffered from racist treatment so much that they

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163 BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Beloved*.

164 MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*, p.72

165 MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*, p.72

went insane and suffered a complete loss of self.<sup>166</sup>

The effects of racism on individual personalities, motherhood and relationships between people have already been mentioned. One more aspect of humanity which was controlled by racism was sexuality. Sethe's mother-in-law had eight children with six different men, and anyone she had loved run off, was hanged or sold. It was very common that black slave women were raped by white men and they were portrayed as sexually aggressive wet nurses or women with excessive sexual appetites, and it was used by those white men as an excuse.<sup>167</sup>

There is still one more dimension of racism and slavery which I did not mention. It is the negative influence on the *oppressors*. Slavery had destructive impacts on both oppressed and oppressive. It had caused that whites became "changed and altered...bloody, silly, worse than they ever wanted to be."<sup>168</sup> Not only slaves had suffered a loss of humanity but also the tyrants had.

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166 MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*, p.188

167 BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: Toni Morrison's Beloved*. p.93

168 Ibid

## 10. MORALS OF THE BOOKS

Every novel is written with some purpose. The aim of the three novels that I chose to analyse is deep and worth meditating. These are not just adventurous stories of some people which are read to amuse oneself and to kill some time. These are the stories containing a message dealing not only with the life of few individuals but with the fate of the whole races, of the whole human society.

If attentive, a reader can detect both, practical life lessons and deep transcendental truths. The fundamental message concerns racism obviously. It warns against its dangerous and destructive effects and demonstrates how badly it hurts people. And these effects are incurable and permanent. Although slaves were freed they have never fully recovered from the psychological damages that were caused because they can never be healed or forgotten. But there are more advices in the novels that can be useful and valuable.

For starters, I would like to mention Atticus's parental methods. He has always emphasized honesty, bravery and dignity. He hated hypocrisy and tried to teach his children to hold their heads high and to fight with it rather than with fists. And never to give up, no matter how many times we have been defeated before, which is a message for the whole mankind: "Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started it is no reason for us to try to win."<sup>169</sup>

The theme of parental love is analyzed in the novel *Beloved* too. Sethe loved her children to such an extent that she was able to kill them, which was in fact her sacrifice, because she has suffered from the consequences of this deed for the rest of her life. She had such deep feelings for her children that Paul D. considered it dangerous.

A question of equality is also discussed in the novels. Thomas Jefferson's words that all men are created equal, is generally accepted declaration.<sup>170</sup> But is it really true? I would not dare to raise doubts about the underlying equality of people. But as Harper Lee indicated through the

<sup>169</sup> LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. p.76

<sup>170</sup> The Declaration of Independence. *Constitution Facts* [online].

character of Atticus, we know that all men are not created equal. Not in the sense of superiority and inferiority. But in the sense of abilities and opportunities. “Some people are smarter than others, some people have more opportunity because they are born with it, some men make more money than others, some ladies make better cakes than others – some people are born gifted beyond the normal scope of most men.”<sup>171</sup> This is an unquestionable truth and every each of us should think about it and about the possible solution. It can be clearly detected also in the other two novels. Bigger’s position has never been equal to the position of whites and he had no chance to live the life like them. Sethe’s children were born free but despite that they did not live a free life and they had very little opportunities.

A valuable lesson can be taken from *Beloved’s* another theme. It teaches a reader that things are not always as they seem to be. That behind the act of violence an enormous love can be hidden. It also reminds us of how fragile relationships between people can be, how fragile motherhood as well as womanhood and manhood is. On the other hand the novel illustrates how strong a will to live is and how powerful an instinct for self-preservation can be. Slaves endured many jeopardies, went through many dangerous situations just to survive and obtain freedom. *Beloved’s* will to live was so strong that she was not able to leave the world of alives even though she was just a baby when she died.

Bigger’s desire to live proved to be stronger than he ever thought it could be. He felt very strong urge to live when he found out that he has to die. He wanted to live to find out “what he was in relation to all the other that lived”<sup>172</sup>, he was asking himself if there was any battle everybody was fighting and he had missed it. He desperately tried to get the answers on his questions and to find out what the meaning of life is. This can be a lesson for us, to think about important things until it is too late.

The novel *Native Son* is fundamentally a novel describing the horrible conditions in

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171 LEE, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. p.205

172 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son.*, p.353

which blacks had to live and warns against its outcomes. The moral of the book is “horror of Negro life in the United States,”<sup>173</sup> according to Richard Wright’s own words. It is important to realize how dangerous an unhappy man can be and what is he capable of to give his life meaning. A man’s need for freedom and self-realization can not be inhibited. There are many themes worth studying. Richard Wright’s novel urges a reader to think about the basic question of the novel - why did Bigger become increasingly violent? He was not born a villain as already mentioned before. He did not want to hurt anyone; he was a product of American society. There were many factors that had played the role in what happened – his family’s poverty, the absence of father and the influence of his friends from the gang. It is important to realize that none of the horrible crimes would be committed if Bigger did not suffer from the sense of a limited life and future and from the constant feeling of fear and injustice.<sup>174</sup>

No wonder crimes are committed if the society raises up unhappy and frustrated members. Wright has warned that if the situation and treatment of blacks does not change, there will be more such Biggers.<sup>175</sup> We should take that caution seriously and every each of us should have a deep look inside ourselves and honestly think about our attitude towards different races.

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173 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*. Introduction, p.XXXIII

174 ANDERSON, George Parker. *American modernism 1914-1945: Research guide to American literature*. p.272

175 WRIGHT, Richard. *Native Son*, Introduction

## 11. CONCLUSION

The novels have been analysed and studied, the main characters have been described and the morals of the books have been emphasized. But it is not enough to read and then close a book and go. The next step should be meditation. Unless a reader contemplate on what he or she has read, it is useless. The target of my thesis would be met, if at least one person stops and thinks about dangers of racism and about its high costs.

Racism needs much attention even nowadays. Even though it may seem like racism has already vanished together with the abolition of slavery, it is far from the truth. It has just acquired another form. Therefore, it is of a vital importance to be aware of it and to transmit these information to younger generations, for example at schools through the lessons of literature, especially in these times of democratic development and globalization of the world, when more and more people migrate and the coexistence of several races, nationalities and cultures is necessary. The three novels that I chose are written in a readable form, they catch reader's attention and occupy his or her mind. They can be used even in a wider scope than just within the topic of racism. The dilemma of family relationships is dealt with; particularly with parental love, motherhood, relationship between siblings and also wife-husband relation; the issues of justice, morality, guilt and consciousness are also not omitted. In many areas can we benefit from versatility of these novels.

All the three novels carry a similar message. *To Kill a Mockingbird* introduces a wonderful father and a lawyer in one person – Atticus. He was fighting for justice and he was not afraid to stand up for discriminated black man who was hated. He was a role model for his children and he is one even for us today. The novel *Native Son* depicts equally admirable lawyer Max, who defended Bigger even though he knew he was guilty. But Max believed in the equality of men and he was determined to fight for Bigger in spite of hatred and contempt from whites. There are

some brave white fighters in *Beloved* too. Amy Denver or Mr. and Mrs. Bodwin helped Sethe with her struggles and were not prejudiced or blinded by racism. These people can serve as an inspiration for us not to ever be afraid to do what is right.

It will be enough to remember the main feature of each novel and each main character because they represent everything what is good in a human soul. Let Sethe's deep love for her children, Atticus's admirable honesty and courage and Max's kindness be an example for us and Bigger's lost heart a warning.

My last suggestion is to be tolerant and to bring up the principle of equality in every each of us and especially in children since their birth. As mentioned in the beginning, the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* states that racism is learned, so it can be unlearned.<sup>176</sup> So even though racism seems unbridgeable, it is not so difficult to fight it in fact. Displaying basic human qualities can nourish valuable human relations. Concerning with the topic, reading that kind of novels and ponder about Atticus, Bigger and Sethe can be the first step.

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176 BLOOM, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*

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## ANNOTATION

<b>Jméno a příjmení:</b>	Bc. Andrea Fuchsová
<b>Katedra nebo ústav:</b>	Katedra anglického jazyka
<b>Vedoucí práce:</b>	Mgr. Andrea Hoffmannová Ph.D.
<b>Rok obhajoby:</b>	2013

<b>Název práce:</b>	Téma rasismu v britské a americké literatuře.
<b>Název v angličtině:</b>	The topic of racism in british and american literature.
<b>Anotace práce:</b>	<p>Závěrečná práce je zaměřena na téma rasismu a rozbor děl amerických autorů Richarda Wrighta, Toni Morrison a Harper Lee, jejichž hlavním tématem je rasismus nebo otroctví a postavení Afroameričanů ve společnosti. Nejprve je objasněna problematika rasismu obecně, jeho vývoj, projevy a důsledky. Dále jsou čtenáři stručně přiblíženy životy autorů; také obsahy děl a jejich historické kontexty. Daná díla, jimiž jsou <i>Native Son</i>, <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> a <i>Beloved</i> jsou dále analyzována. Všechna jsou určitým způsobem zaměřena na problematiku rasismu a jeho následky a i když je každé dílo svým vlastním způsobem originální a výjimečné, v určitých oblastech se prolínají. Na tyto oblasti se dále soustředím. První z nich je kapitola zabývající se rasistickými postoji, druhou oblastí jsou naopak protirasistické postoje a jejich představitelé. V těchto prvních dvou oblastech jsou rozebrány zejména postoje příslušníků bílé rasy k příslušníkům černé, proto jsem se ve třetí oblasti zaměřila na vztah Afro-Američanů k bělochům. Poslední oblast, která čtenáři pomůže získat náhled na celou problematiku a lépe pochopit činy některých postav, se zabývá důsledky rasismu a vinou společnosti.</p>
<b>Klíčová slova:</b>	Rasismus, otroctví, útlak, segregace, autor, román, téma, kontext.
<b>Anotace v angličtině:</b>	The diploma thesis concentrates on the topic of racism and it analyses the novels written by Richard Wright, Toni Morrison and Harper Lee. The main theme of these novels is racism, its development, displays and effects and the position of African Americans in the society. The reader is acquainted with the lives of the authors, with the summaries of the novels and their historical contexts. These novels, which are <i>Native Son</i> , <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> and <i>Beloved</i> , are analyzed further. All of them deal with the topic of racism and its effects and even though each of the novel is unique and original, unifying elements can be found. The first area included in all novels is Rasist attitudes, the second area deals with the opposite -Anti-racist attitudes, the third comments on Attitudes of blacks towards whites and the last one describes The effect of racism and the guilt of society.
<b>Klíčová slova v angličtině:</b>	Rasism, slavery, oppression, segregation, author, novel, theme, context.
<b>Rozsah práce:</b>	120298 znaků
<b>Jazyk práce:</b>	angličtina