



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento degli Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)

Classe LT-12

Tesina di Laurea

*The Trauma of Slavery:
Comparing *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet
Jacobs*

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N° matr. 2005407/LTLLM

Anno Accademico 2022/2023

Abstract

If we talk about American slavery, we allude to the historical page that start with the arrival of the first slave ship in Virginia, in 1619, and the legal institution of chattel slavery¹ - in 1641- by the American colony of Massachusetts, also including the moment when Virginia reinforced the institution of slavery, about 1661-1662, with its first law based on the *partus sequitur ventrem*² doctrine, where the offspring follow the condition of the mother. The legacy of slavery is in many ways still present in American life today.

This thesis was conceived with the main purpose of comparing and contrasting two milestones novels about slavery: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison. As a matter of fact, the former belongs to the slave narrative genre in American literature while the latter is an example of neo-slave narrative (which emerged primarily after World War II, particularly flourishing in the late 1960s and 1970s), and their characteristics differ substantially.

I will compare the two narratives, how the main characters, Linda and Sethe, are built, make examples from other key texts of African American literature, and how these two narratives express the experience of those characters called “slaves”. After a brief overview of the novels, with help of chaptering, this work will consider each narrative in its structure and its focus and the developing of a female protagonist (analyzing more closely the mother-daughter bond); eventually, I will dwell on the psychological aspects of slavery that manifest themselves both as spirits of missed loved ones and as trauma that continues to haunt slaves even after being or having been freed.

¹ The enslaving and owning of human beings and their offspring as a property, able to be bought, sold, and forced to work without wages. Expression used to distinguish this captive form from other systems of forced, unpaid or low-waged labors also considered under the definition of “slavery”.

² The law for slaves and animals.

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We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal;
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights;
that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

(Unanimous Declaration of Independence of the thirteen States of America, 1776)

Preface

William L. Andrews, professor at Chapel Hill at North Carolina University, in writing his personal *Historical Overview of American Tradition* and talking about a possible definition under the general designation of Slave Narrative, defined that it is “any account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave himself or herself”³. In American literature, the genre represents one of the most influential ones, starting from 1760 to the end of the Civil War⁴, where approximately one hundred autobiographies of fugitives or former slaves appeared in the United States.

Still according to his analysis, the earliest novel to have attention in the international field has been *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* published in two volumes in 1789 symbolizing the first book to challenge the common acceptance of slavery as a socio-economic institution in England and America, during the 18th century. This was followed by *The Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave written by himself* published in 1825, revealing to the North the actual horrors of chattel slavery that were happening in the South.

These two important gems in the Anglophone literary tradition were empowered in the late summer of 1831 where, in the Southampton County - Virginia, Nat Turner (1800-1831) incited an insurrection of former slaves and wrote consequently in the same year *The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia*, opening formally many radical declarations of opposition to slavery. The aftermath of Turner’s actions and consequences were carried on by William Lloyd Garrison ⁵, the Anti-Slavery Society ⁶and the abolitionists who were starting to demonstrate support both from the North and mostly from within the same South.

³ Andrews. “How to Read a Slave Narrative”, (<https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/slavenarrative.htm>).

⁴ The American Civil War was fought from 1861 to 1865, between the United States of America and the Confederate State of America, a collection of eleven states that left the Union in 1860 and 1861.

⁵ (1805-1879), American abolitionist and journalist, known for his widely read anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*, founded in 1831.

⁶ Abolitionist society founded in 1833 by William Lloyd Garrisons and had Frederick Douglass as a key leader of the society, who often also spoke at the meetings.

From 1830 to the end of slavery era, the fugitive slave accounts dominated the literary landscape of the antebellum African American tradition. Many authors deserve acknowledgement such as William Wells Brown (-1884), Frederick Douglass (-1895) and Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897), who started their careers via their narratives of experiences as former slaves. Among the three, Harriet Jacobs is considered the earliest known woman to publish her autobiography in 1861 challenging many ideas about slavery: she showed how sexual exploitation made slavery even more brutal and unjust for black women but, mostly, provided the inaccuracy of the image applied to female slaves in the male-authored slave narratives. Furthermore, also thanks to the contribution of Harriet Tubman ⁷ (1822-1913), African American literature has been enriched in the models of female self-expression, courage, and nobility.

Typical outline of a slave narrative, according to James Olney ⁸:

- A. “An engraved portrait, signed by the narrator.
- B. A title page that includes the claim as integral part of the title: “Written by himself” or some close variants. In the literature we can find differences between “written by himself”-expression and not such expressions in the frontpage as in Harriet Jacobs’ one.
- C. A handful testimonials and/or one or more prefaces or introductions written either by a white abolitionist friend or the narrator” (as in the case of William Lloyd and Wendell Phillips for Frederick Douglass, in his 1945’s autobiography) [...].
- D. “A poetic epigraph [...].
- E. The actual narrative [...].
- F. An appendix or appendices composed of documentary material bills of sale, details of purchase from slavery, sermons, anti-slavery speeches, poems, appeals to the reader for funds and moral support in the battle against slavery”.

⁷ Born under the name of Aminta Ross, she is known and remembered for being “the fearless conductor of runaways on the Underground Railroad” and recalled as “The Moses of her people”.

⁸ Olney. “I was Born: Slave Narratives, their Status as Autobiography ad as Literature, “ 50-51.

This specific bulleted list represents the hallmark between the genre of slave narrative, as just defined above, and the modern fictional works that developed during the decades, and resulted in the so-called neo-slave genre.

Ishmael Reed⁹ defines, while working on his novel, that the neo-slave narrative is a “modern fictional work set in the slavery era by contemporary authors or substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effect of enslavement in the New World”. His *Flight to Canada* (1976), together with Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986), is considered part of this new genre, which specifically define “contemporary novel that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative”, as in the definition of Ashraf Rushdy, offered in his *Neo-Slave Narrative*¹⁰ (1999).

All narratives comprised in this second major group are largely classified as novels but may pertain to other genres as well, like fantasy, magical realism or historical fiction. Examples of these are Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), William Styron’s *Confession of Nat Turner* (1976) and Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966).

How can we be sure about the authenticity of facts since these novels are mostly about imagination over the true accounting?

The issue of authenticity is real, and this dissertation will further consider this contemporary debate; to give a taste, Margaret Walker (1915-1998), author of *Jubilee* (1966) and writer of the second-period novels, said “that the basic skeleton of the story is factually true and authentic”¹¹(1990:62).

Authenticity is not just about 20th century novels but also affected the first slave narratives: how is it possible that Frederick Douglass, to name one, wrote by himself his *Narrative* since the slave holders generally did not let the slaves the possibility to learn how to read and write? How sure are we about the authenticity of Harriet Jacobs’ account since it was a white person who overtook the story, reviewed and published it?

Furthermore, did the second-generation authors continue to write about slavery, concealing the cruelest part of the institution and putting in first place the characters’

⁹ The term neo-slave narrative was coined by the author while working on his *Flight to Canada* and used for the first time in a 1984 interview.

¹⁰ Gardner. “Modern Fiction Studies,” 541-43.

¹¹ Walker. “How I Wrote Jubilee and other Essays on Life and Literature,” 62.

stories instead? Or doesn't this stem from the fact that even today African Americans need to make room for, explore and affirm Blackness?

Anim-Addo and Lima in *The power of the neo-slave narrative genre* (2017), believe that two of the main reasons why neo-slave narrative developed when the slave narrative had already lost their immediate usefulness, after the abolition of the institution of slavery, are “the will to re-affirm the historical value of the original slave narrative and to reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by (re)imagining their subjectivity”.

Timeline ¹²

1619: a Dutch ship with a group of 20 captives “and odd negroes¹³” landed at Point Comfort in Virginia, “ushering in the era of American Slavery”.

After their arrival, the colonies remained white and relied mainly on the labor of Native American slaves and white European indentured servants¹⁴; this situation lasted until the end of the 17th century, when the transatlantic slave trade made its impacts on the American colonies.

1661: the first anti-miscegenation statute, with the prohibition of marriage between races (written in Maryland laws, in 1661). The year after, Virginia passes the hereditary and lifelong condition, meaning that the child born from an enslaved mother inherits her slave status (Partus Sequitur Ventrem doctrine).

1776: creation of the Declaration of Independence and boom of slavery in the tobacco fields of Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, where slaves were more than 50% of population, and rice plantation further in the South.

1831: Nat Turner, enslaved preacher, leads a violent rebellion in Southampton (Virginia) where, at least, 57 whites are killed. In the same state and year, slaves’ congregations for religious service at night are prohibited, regardless of whether black or white preachers hold those services.

1850: while California is admitted to the Union as a free state, from the Compromise¹⁵, a second Fugitive Slave law ¹⁶is passed strengthening the rights of slave owners and threatening the rights of free blacks.

1857: the US Supreme Court, ruling in Dred Scott v. Sanford, denies citizenship to all slaves, ex-slaves, and descendants of slaves. Enslaved individuals have no citizenships and no rights at all.

¹² Information from personal notes and “*Slavery and the Making of America*” timeline.

¹³ “20 and odd negroes”, a note in a 1619 letter by John Rolfe, known as the first settler in the colony of Virginia and for being the husband of Pocahontas.

¹⁴ Indentured servitude: servants who typically worked four to seven years in exchange for passage, room, board, lodging and freedom dues. The idea was born in the need for cheap labor in Jamestown (Virginia) because there was a lot of land to care for, but no one to care for it.

¹⁵ The Compromise of 1850 consists of five laws passed in September that dealt with the issue of slavery and territorial expansion.

¹⁶ Passed by the Congress in 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was a part of the 1850 Compromise: the act required that slaves be returned to their owners, even if they were in a free state.

1860: British slave trade across the Atlantic became the most important business of the 18th century; 8 out of the first 12 US presidents were slave owners and supporters of the American Colonization Society-¹⁷, which sent back” free black people to Liberia in 19th century to prevent disruption caused by the free descendants of slaves.

1861-1865: American Civil War, fought to save the Union and not to free the slaves and abolish slavery, according to Abraham Lincoln prior becoming president¹⁸.

1868: Reconstruction era, following the Civil War, was “the effort to reintegrate Southern States from the Confederacy [...] into the United States”¹⁹.

1896: the US Supreme Court, ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson, establishes the doctrine of “separate but equal”, leading to segregation and discriminatory practices. It is the beginning of the

Jim Crow era²⁰ of segregation (late 1870s-1965): African Americans were forbidden from drinking from the same water fountains, eating at the same restaurants or attending the same schools as white Americans, all lasting until the 1960s. The Voting Rights Act of **1965** attempted to correct racial discrimination in voting, placing restrictions on several southern states if they tried to change voting rights laws.

¹⁷ American Organization founded in 1816 by Robert Finley. The aim was to encourage and support migration of freeborn black and emancipated slaves to Africa and modeled on an earlier British Colonization in Africa.

¹⁸ Millercenter.org.

¹⁹ History.com.

²⁰ Jim Crow: theatre character in troubadour shows, a racist depiction of African Americans and of their culture, basing the character on a folk homonymous trickster who had long been popular among black slaves. Developed and popularizes by the entertainer Thomas Rice (1808-1860), the character is adapted to a traditional slave song called “Jump Jim Crow”.

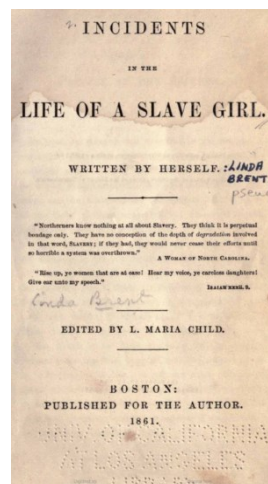
Introduction

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (hereafter also referred to as *Incidents*) is Harriet Ann Jacobs' autobiography of struggle, survival, and finally freedom. Published in 1861, thus belonging to the antebellum literary tradition, is considered the first and most widely -read female slave narrative.

The peculiarity of her telling is the realistic and intimate portrayal of the protagonist's personal, emotional, and sexual story while being in captivity. In her writing we can find accusations of victimization of enslaved African American women by enslaved African American men, the discovery of the real meaning of family, of motherhood, and the importance of separation (as it happened, for example, the main character lived "far" from grandmother and her children during her seven-years hide). Even though most of her fellows' narratives were not written under pseudonyms (such as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1845), Jacobs chose to write under the name of Linda Brent "in order to protect herself and her children" as stated by Belasco and Johnson editors²¹.

Harriet Jacobs herself tried to publish the book, sailing to England in 1858, without any success. The first version's title page bears the name of Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880) who not only agreed to write the preface to Jacobs' production but also became her book's first editor.

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²¹ Belasco and Johnson. "The Bedford Anthology of American Literature," 918.

²² Lapham's Quarterly Digital Library. 2013. *Harriet Jacobs* (1894). <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/harriet-jacobs-200>.

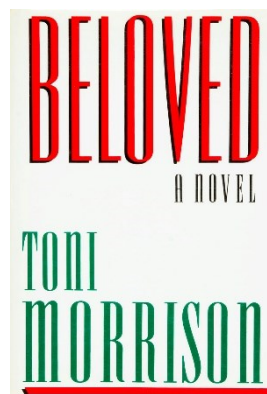
Beloved earned Toni Morrison the Pulitzer Prize in Literature ²³ in 1988; the novel was published in 1987 from the black American novelist.

Born in Ohio, in 1931, Morrison was already a well-established writer when she printed this acclaimed novel based on the true story of Margaret Garner, also called “Peggy”: an enslaved African American woman who escaped in 1856 from Kentucky with other slaves. When, during the escape, they were pursued by a posse of slave catchers, she committed infanticide against her own daughter rather than allowing the child to be returned to slavery. She died in 1858²⁴.

Beloved addresses many big issues for slavery history such as the mother-daughter relationship, the definition of manhood, womanhood, the definition of the slave itself before and after being freed and pain given from the past. Morrison takes on the first-person voice of the antebellum era “to fill the blanks that the slave narratives left” as she personally wrote in her *Site of Memory*, pp. 192-193²⁵.

Among the countless awards, in 1993 Toni Morrison was awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature as someone “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality”, as stated by the Nobel jury ²⁶ who awarded her victory.

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My work will be structured in three main chapters.

²³ The Prize is awarded “for distinguished fiction published during the year by an American author, preferably dealing with American life”, together with the amount of \$15,000 (Pulitzer.org).

²⁴ Byatt. “Introduction,” viii.

²⁵ Anim-Addo and Lima. “The Power of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre,” 4.

²⁶ Nobelprize.org.

²⁷ Murdo Macleod. 2019. *Toni Morrison*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/06/toni-morrison-obituary>.

The first chapter's purpose is to focus on the narrative as a textual genre: the differences between the two periods' different styles and characteristics, finding practical examples through a critical analysis based on the books compared. In the first section, there will be a discussion on the narrator's point of view including the choice of the narrator figure, with all the consequential differences brought from this decision to the meaning and/or purpose of the narration. The second section will be devoted to style: *Incidents* is clearer, realistic and accurately depicts the events, while *Beloved* uses lyrical language, symbolism, biblical allusions, and sophisticated non-linear storytelling approach. This paragraph will also address the issue of authenticity as already outlined in the preface: from the outset, historians question the accuracy of the stories Jacobs, as a slave, was not supposed to be able to read or write, whereas Morrison allegedly tore the history apart to create a fictional novel. The third and last section of the chapter will analyze the main turning points and details of the narration since one of the main concerns for Morrison narrating psychological aspects of the characters' emotional lives aspects that continue to resonate even after slavery, while for Jacobs the importance is given to every single little element and moment that she felt and lived, focusing on the institution of slavery and its historical passages.

The second chapter will dig more into the reality of being a woman during slavery and the many facets of womanhood. The first section will make distinctions about the female points of view of the narrations, both in the authorial and characters field. The second and third sections are about mother love and the mother-daughter bond as two of the strongest elements that represent a woman. Because the condition of slavery completely erased the possibility of being considered as a human being, and in a deeper sense also as a woman and a mother, this thesis will analyze the emotional implications of this exclusion. How can one's humanity and love express themselves in such a context? I will try to answer to this question referring to the texts. Both narratives address these issues but in different ways and with different meanings, starting with the fact that one is a firsthand experience and the other is not.

The third chapter deals with the psychological trauma of slavery that can occur variously: the first two sections will deal with the ghosts of both loved ones and the past,

brought from slavery. Well-known is the process of “rememory²⁸” in *Beloved* as the personal process of healing and learning to live with the horrendous past. In the second section there will be a close focus on a specific type of trauma: the sexual one. The last section is a temporal bridge between the slavery period and today: after the analysis of post-trauma examples in literature, both in slave and in neo-slave narratives, is offered a reflection on what we continue on seeing today (in remembrances of slavery, for example, or in monuments and museums).

²⁸ As Morrison defines it, “rememory” is an active process of reconstitution that involves passing on the story in such a way that it becomes real, embodied, lived through the storyteller’s mediation. (Anim-Addo and Lima. “The Power of Neo-Slave Narrative Genre, “ 4).

Chapter 1: the Slave Narrative

The Narrator's point of view

Maryemma Graham defines that “one of the fundamental differences between the early periods of the African American novel and the present is not only the range of voices that we hear but also the intensity and creativity with which African American writers transform their own and other literary traditions” (2004: iii²⁹).

We can consider intensity and creativity as a part of the “actual narrative” of the first-period literary works, one of the major component as James Olney was pointing out in his work “*I was born*”. Units of this points are: “a first sentence beginning and then specifying a place but not a date of birth; a sketchy account of parentage [...]”; descriptions of the masters, mistresses, overseers, punishments and whipping activity whether as witnesses or victims; “an account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mother clinging to their children as they are torn from them; a description of failed attempts to escape [...], and successful attempts to escape [...], traveling by night guided by the North Star” (1984:50-51).

That is what Mary Prince³⁰, William Wells Brown³¹, Frederick Douglass³² and, in our case, Harriet Jacobs, just to name a few, did in their personal accountings of lives as slaves.

I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. (1861:11)

The first chapter of *Incidents* opens the narration with Linda, the protagonist, who wants to inform the reader of her situation, following the scheme that any other slave's writing adopted.

In order to analyze the two literary texts, we can outline the differences in the narrative structure. We define: the narrator, whether it is in first or in third person; the

²⁹ Graham, M. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*. (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

³⁰ Prince, M. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave: Related by Herself*. 2017.

³¹ Brown, W., W. *Clotel, or, The President's Daughter: a Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*. 1853.

³² Douglass, F. *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. 1845.

way the facts are told to the reader; and, finally, the “final” message given and/or the purpose of the narration itself.

O, what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me! Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered (1861:47)

Besides the obvious first-person narrator, Harriet Jacobs is admirable for her ability to create emotional connection in the readers because she speaks directly to them as if she were writing in her personal diary. No information is omitted here: we can find the naked truth, with details and no restriction of speech, since many did not even know what was happening in the South, as she wrote:

The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe. Surely, if you credited one half the truths that are told to you concerning the helpless millions suffering in this cruel bondage, you at the north would not help to tighten the yoke. You surely would refuse to do for the master, on your own soil, the mean and cruel work which trained bloodhounds and the lowest class of whites do for him at the South (1861:45).

Toni Morrison narration instead belongs to the “kind of literary archeology”³³, where the character is forced to have a bi-temporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuity from the past in the slavery period. The present is always written against the past in the background, which is often erased but still legible. The narration, in fact, is in third person omniscient: it can access to the inner thoughts of the character and report those reflections in the third person without giving direct judgement. This appears immediately evident starting from the opening sentence:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old - as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it; [...] as soon as two tiny handprints appeared in the cake [...]. (1897:1)

The novel’s overture is the clear clue that we are reading a contemporary work of fiction since there is no “I was born”-expression but a strategy of narrativizing history. Nevertheless, there are two facets of the novel’s narrator that challenge what has just been said about *Beloved*. Throughout the body, we witness a switch of points of view in all the

³³ Anim-Addo and Lima. “The Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form,” 4.

characters, assuring the reader a complete understanding of the situations that each of them experienced and how their stories connect to each other.

Furthermore, at the end of the novel, Morrison adds a first-person section with the aim to enhance the portrait of Sethe, Denver and Beloved only, deepening the reader's knowledge on how these characters were built. In fact, in chapters 20-22 we find their own monologues which allows them to directly express their thoughts and opinions; in chapter 23 all of them three speak together so much so that trying to distinguish who is talking is difficult, there's a blurred line.

Beloved, she my daughter. (1987:231, chapter 20)

Beloved is my sister. (1987:237, chapter 21)

I am Beloved and she is mine. (1987: 243, chapter 22)

In these three chapters they appear like individual melodies that only in chapter 23 get together to compose a beautiful symphony:

Tell me the truth. / Didn't you come from the other side? / Yes I was on the other side. / You came back because of me? / Yes. / You rememory me? / Yes. I remember you. / You never forgot me? / Your face is mine. / Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now. (1897:249)

A substantial difference between the two analyzed texts stands on their purpose: Harriet Jacobs wrote countless times in her literary work that she was telling everything to the reader with the aim of spreading awareness concerning the "unknown" and, for them, the "impossible". An example can be found in the preface, written directly by Jacobs herself:

Reader, to be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my description fall far short of the facts (1861:5))

Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered (1861:47)

Toni Morrison, instead, makes no definitive assertion about the novel's actual purpose and meaning adding supernatural elements that contribute to give a mystical and symbolical quality to her history:

Baby Suggs died shortly after the brothers left, with no interest whatsoever in their leave-taking on hers, and right afterward Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. [...] "Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on." The sideboard

took a step forward but nothing else did. “Grandma must be stopping it” [...] “I doubt that [...] You forgetting how little it is [...]. She wasn’t even two years old when she died (1897:10)

Christopher Mulvey, in *Freeing the Voice, creating the Self: the novel and Slavery* wrote that “when African Americans made the move from the writing of narratives to the writing of novels, they were stepping across a void no matter how close the last narratives were to the first novels. At that moment, the writers were giving up the authenticity of life for the authenticity of imagination, and the guarantee to the reader had to be of a different order”. This specific move has been considered as a moment of failure, according to Addison Gayle, because “the early black writers attempted to create a literature patterned upon that of whites”³⁴. Yet, it is through comparison with the background against which these novels were written, considering them in relation to the texts that had preceded them in an attempt to ground their possibility of speaking, that they are to be understood.

Stylistic Choices

Style is the literary device that explains the author’s words choices, how he or she works out sentences structure and arrangement, the language used (whether realistic or figurative) and how events, objects and ideas are described: all together they establish the mood, images, and meaning in the text and contribute to the way the reader receives the narration itself.

The bottom line is given by the direction of the words: both Jacobs and Morrison write straightforwardly to the reader, but differences in this direction are visible and significant in the overall.

As already pointed out in the previous section, *Incidents* represents the reality as we are witnessing it, defenceless:

He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him (1861:44)

The style can be traced back to the nineteenth-century romance (whose distinctive features emphasize emotion and imagination) perhaps because it was the only form

³⁴ Mulvey, “Freeing the voice, creating the self: the novel and slavery”, 18.

available to her at the time of writing. However, she spares nothing of the context and continues to focus her narrative on her own life and experiences and not on those of a completely fictional protagonist.

A clear literary strategy is recognizable on the use of rhetorical questions in order to get the audience to ponder about specific topics, depending on the chapter's object. The intrinsic meaning of this strategy is to guide the reader through a succession of challenging and life-threatening decision, that the narrator makes in her own life, encouraging more consideration for the complexity of her slave condition. This happens not only with the protagonist's situations but also with the horrors of slavery as an institution. In fact, chapter 40 refers to the Fugitive Slave Law- ³⁵(which is also the title of the chapter) as "the beginning of a reign of terror to the colored population" and asks right after:

But what cared the legislators of the "dominant race" for the blood they were crushing out of trampled hearts? (1861:287)

Using the expression "dominant race" she wants to highlight the illusion of White supremacy and the irony of a supposedly superior race engaging in behaviors such as severing families and imprisoning others.

The style of *Beloved* is nonetheless complex and expressive. The details contained cannot often be appreciated in their full meaning in a single reading, despite the simple grammar and word choice. Morrison herself says that "my writing expects, demands participatory reading... the reader supplies the emotions. [...] My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it" ³⁶.

Although the narration of much of the book is provided by an unnamed narrator, the brief passages held by Sethe, Denver and Beloved each have distinctive voices that reflect on the different linguistic structures. Sethe and Denver's communication is both straightforward while Beloved speaks in a heightened manner that is much harder to

³⁵ The Fugitive Slave Law was a type of Southern legislation that whites instituted in a desperate effort to maintain their slave economy. The law provided for the seizure and return of runaway slaves who escaped from one state into another or into a federal territory (even if a person was in a free state for many years). The law passed by Congress in 1793, in 1850 and again in 1864 reinforcing the measures. Furthermore, the act provided alleged fugitive slaves with no protection of *habeas corpus*, no right to trial by jury and no right to testify on their own behalf (britannica.com, americanhistorycentral.com).

³⁶ Bao. "On Magic Narrative Technique in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," 3.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120803.477>.

understand. Furthermore, in her monologue at chapter 22, we can see an absence of punctuation and an exaggeration of spacing between the words, in places where punctuation should be, as if to represent a child's speech.

In the beginning I could see her I could not help her because the clouds were in the way
In the beginning I could see her the shining in her ears she does not like the circle
around her neck I know this I look hard at her so she will know that the clouds are
in the way I am sure she was me [...] (1987:244)

As a fundamental component of Morrison's narrative strategy, there is the well-known blurring method³⁷: the shapes of things and their causes are nebulous when it comes to what life was for freed or fugitive enslaved men and women after their time in captivity, there is the alienation from the self as the cruelest legacy of slavery; the blur also stands between facts and fiction and blurred relationships (as seen, in chapter 23). The opening is a concise but dense line, difficult to understand immediately without the context. The family house is identified only by a number without an apparent organization system (*124 was spiteful*) and the gender of the baby or the reason for its spite is not given (*full of a baby's venom*). We can then rehash Morrison's style as a combination of vivid, evocative information and descriptions with a language that forces the reader to take their time unraveling the story until its deeper significance.

As introduced in the preface, the issue of authenticity characterized both slave and neo-slave narratives since the former is hypothetically written by someone who never had the chance to learn how to write and read and the latter re-writes history emphasizing more the fictional characters' emotions.

In *Beloved*, Morrison disassembles the "official history" creating a linguistic picture of the past and enriching the text with many instances of self-reflection. To further decrease the claims of inauthenticity, Morrison includes in the novel the episode of Stamp Paid giving the newspaper clipping to Paul D reporting Sethe's story about the infanticide happened earlier in the past. Paul D immediately reacts to it:

This ain't her mouth. I know her mouth and this ain't it." Before Stamp Paid could speak her said it and even while he spoke Paul D said it again. Oh, he heard all the old man was saying, but the more he heard, the stranger the lips in the drawing became. (1897:181)

³⁷ Beaulieu, E., A. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. (Greenwood, 1999), chapter 3.

Thanks to Paul D, it is demonstrated here how textual records frequently fall short of accuracy capturing life as it is experienced. The reader is made aware of the distinction between an original and a copied photograph or text: Morrison argues that a fictionalized narrative of a former slave, as in *Beloved* case, may be more “historically real” than authentic papers, which were frequently falsified or written from the perspective of the “dominant culture”³⁸.

In a hypothetical conversation, Jean Fagan Yellin (in his *Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs’ Slave Narrative*, 1981) could counter these allegations especially after the discovery of a cache of Jacobs’ correspondence that confirms that the story is written by herself and deepens the meaning of some experiences happened in her personal life. In fact, her writing “has just been transformed from a questionable slave narrative into a well-documented pseudonymous autobiography”³⁹. Her correspondence, as to an exchange of letters and accounting of other events that she did not include in *Incidents*, “establish(es) Jacobs’ authorship and clarifies the role of her editor. In doing so, [...] (it) enriches our literary history by presenting us with a unique chronicle of the efforts of an underclass black woman to write and publish her autobiography in antebellum America” (1981:480). Moreover, thanks to the two letters sent from the editor, L. Maria Child, we can answer to many queries posed by historians about Jacobs’ manuscript editing: Child outlines her editorial processes in the first letter, and “a detailed explanation of the published contract” in the second.

Main turning points and key details

Incidents is lined-structured in a way in which it is possible for the reader to chronologically follow Linda’s events and “incidents”:

- At six years old, her mother dies, and Linda’s happy childhood ends,
- At nearly twelve years old, her mistress dies, and she passes as an inheritance in the hands of the new five-year-old mistress,
- At fourteen years old, Linda lives with the Flint family,
- At fifteen years old, Dr. Flint begins to “whisper foul words in my (her) ear” (1861: 44)

³⁸ Khatana. “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Rediscovering History,” 106.

³⁹ Yellin. “Written by Herself: *Harriet Jacobs’ Slave Narrative*,” 479.

- At sixteen years old, the jealous Mrs. Flint finds Linda's presence intolerable.

According to Doherty, Jacobs "interweaves her story with long stretches of anti-slavery rhetoric, much valuable ethnography and some solid history"⁴⁰. In fact, together with her life episodes, we learn about many literary and philosophical references (such as Bible's passages or literature works) or historical references (such as Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion in chapter twelve "Fear of Insurrection", the Compromise of 1850, the Mason and Dixon's line⁴¹ or the Quaker abolitionists group⁴²).

As we infer from Linda's chronological order and generically from the slave narrative literature, time for enslaved people is represented by some meaningful passages in their everyday lives; examples are given in the tenth chapter ("A perilous passage in the slave girl's life") or more specifically in the fifth chapter ("The trials of girlhood") that brings explicit examples of the moment when Linda understands to be a grown-up woman because Dr. Flint began taking advantage of her moral and sexual conceptions.

But I now entered on my fifteenth year – a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl (1861:44).

He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of- I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him – [...] He told me I was his property (1861: 44)

Time-⁴³ is also the movements from the field to the graveyard, according to many slaves: linear from birth to death, described as a centripetal movement that goes to the center. It is also represented as a circle, as something that mirrors the bio cycle and the rhythm of nature, that only reminds to them of the duties on the field:

I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages (Douglass 1845:1)

⁴⁰ Doherty. "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," 80.

⁴¹ The line separating the southern slave states from the northern free-soil states. It was originally drawn between Maryland and Pennsylvania and the line continues to represent figuratively the political and social dividing line between the North and the South today (www.britannica.com).

⁴² The Quakers, also known as The Society of Friends, were some of the first white individuals. to oppose slavery in American colonies and throughout Europe. They created a religious movement that forbade practitioners from owning slaves. This group's member Amy Post assisted Harriet Jacobs with her writing of the autobiography (www.york.ac.uk).

⁴³ Beaulieu, E., A. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. (Greenwood, 1999), chapter 4.

Beloved, instead, “breaks the traditional linear narrative structure and makes the past and the present interact frequently during the narration” (2012:2-3) giving multiple points of view of the one central event of the novel which Morrison’s focused on. As Jinping pointed out, the author consistently uses together the present tense and flashbacks, stories or episodes plainly told that happened in the past, creating a juxtaposition. Almost always this “touching” occurs to add meaning and details to the main narrative: in fact, we distinguish a main scheme, which begins the narrative (“*124 was spiteful*”, set around 1973 in Cincinnati), and a past scheme (set around 1850s when Sethe is brought to Sweet Home, Kentucky’s plantation). With this nonlinear structure Morrison creates a “suspending and mythical atmosphere [...] because fragments of events are united by the process of rememory” (2012:3) ⁴⁴.

“As time progresses, experience becomes memory, memory becomes what Toni Morrison calls rememory and rememory becomes the mechanism with which humans shape their own identity and perceive the identity of others. [...]”. This is how Mack Lannahan defines in his *Performativity of Time in Morrison’s Beloved* how dialogic narrative structure and the deferral in time is central in Morrison’s writings. Confirming the idea already given before from Jinping: time in neo-slave narratives is something that “sometimes (is) circling back, other time spiralling around its growing characters” but never follows the chronological and natural growing of the protagonist or the other characters ⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ Bao. “On Magic Narrative Technique in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” 2-3.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120803.477..>

⁴⁵ Lannahan. “The Performativity of Time and Memory in Morrison’s *Beloved* and Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*,” 20-21.

Chapter 2: being a Woman during Slavery

A slave has no more legal authority over his child than a cow has over her calf. The fact that the slave, as a chattel persona, may be bought, sold, transported from one place to another, mortgaged, attached, leased, inherited, and “distributed” in the settlement of estates, shows plainly that slaves cannot constitute families (1853:114⁴⁶)

At this point of my dissertation, it is clear that we are discussing two female-authored stories with female protagonists: it seems obvious to say that the narrations have a female point of view. According to the *American Slave Code* (1853) as cited above, marriage and the core meaning of motherhood – rearing children and caring for them – were not accepted during slavery. In an overview of the generic quality of motherhood, women gave birth only for the sake of increasing the labor force, an intimate relationship with children had no place in the process and there was a consequent lack of awareness because motherhood was something not conceived at all. As Douglass tells us:

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant – before I knew her as my mother [...]. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s towards its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother of the child (1845:2)

Frederick Douglass is a prototype in his 1845 *Narrative*, providing a “definition” for the negative mother-child relationship and recalling his own experience with her mother; we do not use in their case the term “relationship” because he barely knew her since he had met her not “more than four or five times in my life” (1845:2).

Women’s point of view

Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech. (Isaiah, 32:9 cited by Harriet Jacobs in the front page of her work)

The focus in the literature about slavery has mostly been on male-authored slave narratives and centered, between the others, on the model offered by the autobiography of Frederick Douglass (1845), which has been the most widely read of all the narratives that belong to the genre. Female-authored ones are more significant when it is time to focus

⁴⁶ Goodell, W. *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice: its distinctive features shown by its statutes, judicial decision, and illustrative facts* (New York, 1853). 113-114.

more on the female perspective and experience; among the other things they deal with difficult themes such as motherhood, sexual oppression, and abuse. Andrea O'Reilly believes that racial oppression towards black people and motherhood are central themes in *Beloved* because "Morrison, herself a black writer, often reflects upon the topic of black motherhood both in and out of her novels"⁴⁷.

Incidents specifically targets woman as the audience and cause:

I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the conditions of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage [...] (1861:6).

According to Doherty, this strategy is "both demographically and rhetorically astute" (1986:81) because it is commonly known that the most committed abolitionists were the women who lived up in the Northern states of America⁴⁸. Along to that, Northern women were advised to educate themselves to the true nature of slavery by reading and subscribing to anti-slavery publications: "For the Northern woman who took up the challenge, the basic text, after the Bible, was the slave narrative" (1986:82).

Persisting on the gender context of the narrative, Jacobs takes advantage of rhetorical strategies to refer to the reader as a "(sexual) equal" playing on values and emotions which are more powerful and energetic for the feminine part of the society: she knows her audience and she plays with it. For example, once having her second child in 1833, a female girl named Ellen (fictional name), the protagonist is saddened even more:

When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women (1981:119).

This womanist perspective through the narration makes the normal reading harsher, especially during the scenes of abuse and physical punishment. In the *History of Mary Prince* (published in 1831) the protagonist, Mary Prince, not only recounts her own events but also provides testimonies about the lives of those who were living around her, presenting an excellent case of this issue. One example is Hetty's story – her surrogate mother – who is abused and whipped by the master who's indifferent even her being pregnant. She then will give birth to a dead child and, because of this painful loss, "many

⁴⁷ Wike. "The Denial of Motherhood in *Beloved* and *Crossing the River*," 10.

⁴⁸ Doherty. "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," 81.

slaves are convinced death is better for her” (1831:21). Hetty recovers quickly from this episode, quick enough for the master to whip her again.

Gender made no difference in the punishment of slaves: usually the victims were standing naked, leaning against a pole, while whipped in front of the others watching (most of the times forced to watch, as an illustrative lesson from the masters), creating a very uncomfortable situation. This position itself was particularly humiliating, mostly for women since masters were men, the 99% of the time, which made female slaves much more susceptible to this kind of punishment. In fact, “the stripping and touching of slaves had sexually exploitative, sometimes sadistic function. Nakedness implied lack of civility, morality, and sexual restraint even when the nakedness was forced”⁴⁹.

Not all authors are explicit like Harriet Jacobs. In the case of Mary Prince, there are not open examples of sexual abuse, but some passages let the reader’s mind imagine it:

He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him, I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me (1831:13)

This embodies the outcome and the impact of the sexual abuse on women as it is clearly depicted as a sexual advantage taken by the master. Indeed, “female slaves were subjected to the humiliation and pain of sexual exploitation. Rape, concubinage, and the wrath of jealous mistresses were only a few of the indignities [...] [they] suffered just because they were women”⁵⁰. And sometimes these suffered worse things than the physical whipping.

Let’s consider the gender question and the woman’s perspective in Morrison’s *Beloved*. The protagonist is described as a mother because “milk was all I ever had” (1987:185), and there are repeated references to her breasts and allusions to women’s menstrual cycle:

Sethe had had twenty-eight days [...] of enslaved life. From the pure clear stream of spit that the little girl dribbled into her face to her oily blood was twenty-eight days (1987:113).

⁴⁹ Bos. “The Female Slave Experience: An Analysis of Female Slave Narratives,” 19.

⁵⁰ Alonzo. “A Study of Two Women’s Slave Narratives: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *The History of Mary Prince*,” 121.

There are also hints to the giving-birth moment, precisely when Beloved makes her first re-appearance into Sethe's life, stimulating her memory thereafter. Morrison describes the event both by Sethe and Beloved points of view:

Sethe's bladder filled to capacity. [...] Right in front of its (the outhouse) door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless. [...] More like flooding the boat when Denver was born. [...] But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now (1987:63)

The woman gulped water from a speckled tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times the woman drank as though she had crossed a desert (1987:63)

These two episodes, written just a few lines apart, suggest the mother's susceptibility that is depleted by the child's overwhelming and yearning demand⁵¹. Not a coincidence that there are water references and Sethe had no-stopping water as soon as she saw Beloved standing on her house's porch.

When reading *Incidents* and *Beloved*, the two female authors address another topic in a significant way: wedding, as a symbol, a ceremony and as a type of relationship that can exist with a man or a husband.

Sethe had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that "somebody" son who had fathered every one of her children. A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as though Sweet Home really was one (1987:33).

Sethe is depicted as a woman who had the luck to "marry" a man, live with him for many years and having him taking care of her children while being both slaves in Sweet Home. Although it is defined as a marriage, Sethe and Halle really did not formally celebrate it firstly because of their condition and, lastly, because "they said it was all right for us to be husband and wife and that was it. All of it" (1987:72).

That lady I worked for in Kentucky gave them to me when I got married". What they called married back there and back then. "I guess she saw how bad I felt when I found out there wasn't going to be no ceremony, no preacher. [...] I thought there should be some ceremony. Dancing maybe. A little sweet william in my hair. [...] I never saw a wedding, but I saw Mrs. Garner's wedding gown in the press, and heard her go on about what it was like (1987:72)

The narrator in *Incidents* deals with marriage as something that she would like to have, with a man that she really loves, but that eventually she does not have. In chapter

⁵¹ Schapiro. "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," 194-195.

seven, entitled “The lover”, she takes time accounting her emotions and feelings for a man. She tells the reader about the free “young colored carpenter” (1861:58) living in the neighborhood. He then even proposed to marry her:

I loved him with all the ardor of a young girl’s first love. But when I reflected that I was a slave, and that the laws gave no sanction to the marriage of such, my heart sank within me [...] (1861:58).

The lover wanted also to buy Linda’s freedom, but she was afraid of her master’s reaction and the complete opposition of her mistress, too; “She [the mistress] would have been delighted to have got rid of me, but not in that way” (1987:59). Furthermore:

Even if he could have obtained permission to marry me while I was a slave, the marriage would give him no power to protect me from my master. It would have made him miserable to witness the insults I should have been subjected to. And then, if we had children, I knew they must “follow the condition of the mother (1861:65)

The story about the lover goes on through the chapter and ends with the discussion between Linda and her master who, as soon as he gets to know Linda’s intention on marriage and how much she loves him, she abruptly exclaims: “How dare you tell me so!” (1861:61). She eventually advised the lover to go to the Free States “where his tongue would not be tied, and where his intelligence would be of more avail to him” (1861:66). Linda remained in the same situation as before, with her “dream of my (her) childhood (was) over. [...] lonely and desolate”.

At the end of the story, Harriet Jacobs writes:

Reader, my story ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! (1861:302)

She emphasizes that, unlike other slaves’ narratives, her story cannot follow the usual plot: she has no brave male defender, no home of her own (as she would note after this) and is still unmarried. Now she is free and may be judged according to the laws and morals of the free world, embracing a new paradigm of female independence.

Mother love

Mother love has immeasurable shapes and no set standards because each and every mother makes her own decision regarding what to do and how to do about her children. Among everything, giving food to the newborn/baby is one of the most crucial thus important things to do as a mother because milk (from breastfeeding but not necessarily) keeps the infant healthy and provides all the nutrients in the right proportion. This importance was something completely denied to enslaved women, especially for those who had recently given birth. In slavery we can read often read about the interracial nursing:

Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you [...] and to have so little yet (1981:229)

Morrison's protagonist, a woman, and a mother, has witnessed this denial of the right to breastfeed: when she was little in the need to be nourished and as the mother who had to feed the children. As a matter of fact, Nan is not her real mother because she "was in the rice" (working in the fields) but this black lady breastfed other whitebabies (such as the mistress' children) and, if anything was left over, Sethe. Even though she may never have starved, this might be deeply interpreted i.e., the existence of a connection between the breast milk and one's essence or core being. As a result, if she does not have nursing milk to claim as her own, she feels she has no self to claim. Further on the story, in chapter seven, Sethe reveals to the reader – while in a conversation with Paul D – that Schoolteacher's nephews assaulted her and stole her breast milk:

"They used cowhide on you?"

"And they took my milk."

"They beat you and you was pregnant"

"And they took my milk!" (1987:25)

Jacobs also recalls the time when, at six years old, her mother died, and she learned "by the talk around me (her)" that she was a slave. She then explains to the reader her family's situation and implicitly brought the interracial nursing issue on the story:

My mother's mistress was the daughter of my grandmother's mistress. She was the foster-sister of my mother; they were both nourished at any grandmother's breast. In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food (1861:1)

On the other hand, *Dessa Rose's* protagonist⁵², Ruth, prefers "to preserve life rather than embrace societal norms and prejudice", refusing to have her baby nursed by a white woman, changing the leading idea in history, because she felt "less than a woman". It did naturally occur, and every woman would have done it whether black or white, giving the primary importance to the life at stake.

Mother love during slavery is something not conceived, as seen. Together with interracial nursing, the enslaved mother had to face one of the biggest pain a mother can handle, as documented in some accountancies: slaves auction and the separation of the children.

Gone! All gone! Why don't God kill me?" I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence (1861:27).

In *Incidents*, in "The Slaves' New Year's Day" chapter, Harriet Jacobs describes New Year's Day that for slaves in Southern States means hiring day: on January 1st, the slaves are in auction, sold and hired, and by January 2nd "the slaves are expected to go to their new masters". The optimistic outcome might be that the slave is hired by the same farm and master. Oppositely speaking, they change farms, and they can travel all over other states in the South for another year of work in the plantation until another New Year's Day. The choice from the auction is unquestionable or the slaves are whipped.

[...] to the slave mother New Year's Day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies (1861:26)

In the same chapter she brings the witness of a mother in deep pain for the "departure" of all her children: "[...] I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all.", 1861:26). A mother "may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies" (1861:26).

⁵² Sherley, A. Williams. *Dessa Rose* (1986).

In the first chapter, Harriet Jacobs tells the reader about her grandmother, her faithful service to the community that – at the death of the mistress – has been completely erased, bequeathed, and put to the auction block: “These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton eye they plant, or the horse they tend” (1861:15-16).

Sallie, as she was called, was herself sold that day, but not with her mother: a man named Thomas Thurman purchased Sallie to take care of his sick wife. She would never see her mother again⁵³

The New York Times Magazine in 2020 dedicated the 1619 Project to examine the legacy of slavery in America. Anne C. Bailey, author of the article from which the previous citation is taken, tells the story of Sarah Elizabeth Adams who was a five-years-old child when she was sold in the same auction as her mother but not together with her, in the mid-1840s. “We know from enslaved people themselves – the relative few who were able to write or otherwise tell their stories – that the auction block was even more feared than a lashing” writes Bailey reporting also what Josiah Henson, one formerly enslaved man, wrote on his accounting:

“Common as are slave-auctions in the Southern states, the full misery of the event – of the scenes which precede and succeed it – is never understood till the actual experience comes”.

The constant worry that their children would be sold away plagued enslaved parents. Susan Hamilton, another slave auction’s witness, recollected in a 1938 interview that “night and day, you could hear men and women screaming... ma, pa, sister or brother... taken without any warning. People was always dying from a broken heart”⁵⁴

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs also talks about the auction and, as a mother of eight, recalls the pain that a mother experiences when the children depart for an unknown destination:

What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children (1987:32-33).

⁵³ Bailey and Bowman.

“For hundreds of years, enslaved people were bought and sold in America. Today most of the sites of this trade are forgotten”, (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/12/magazine/1619-project-slave-auction-sites.html>).

⁵⁴ Brown. “Barbaric: America’s cruel history of separating children from their parents”, (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/05/31/barbaric-americas-cruel-history-of-separating-children-from-their-parents>).

Among the others, Halle was the one who managed to see the most and he is also the one who bought Baby Suggs freedom. Two of her girls, “neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye” (1987:33).

The mother-daughter bond

“Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit [...] so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one.” (1861:57)

The relationship between a mother and her children has always been complicated, this was true also for white women, throughout the XIX century since “when a married woman who was white bore children she had no legal claim to them”⁵⁵. Interracial nursing was quite common in the South, with black nannies forced to nurse white children while giving up their own. The unique guardian-figure of the family shaped in the male figure person of the husband or father had “the legal right to make every meaningful decision in their life”, as pointed out by Wolff (419). Despite the figures of “Mother” and “Motherhood” being idealized also in slavery time, actual enslaved mothers had no real power or real rights to protect their babies since they could have been sold or harmed anytime.

Both *Beloved* and *Incidents* depict the complexities and challenges of the relationships between the two female figures. In Morrison’s case we read about Sethe and Denver, but also about the family situation before and after the arrival of Beloved; in Jacobs’ case we know better Linda and her relationship with her daughter Ellen.

Regardless of this topic being present in both cases, the historical contexts of the narrations mark the difference.

As an autobiography, *Incidents* writes about motherhood as “the universality of maternal feeling” and uses the personal account of the struggle of raising a child under these specific oppressive conditions as an implicit subscription to the abolishment of slavery. Stephanie Lie, defining Motherhood as an instrument for resistance, says that Jacobs presents Linda as a woman who is “relying upon an understanding of maternity as

⁵⁵ Wolff. “*Margaret Garner: A Cincinnati Story*,” 419.

a form of innate attachment” whose actions are “largely determined by the effect they will have on her children and their eventual emancipation” (2006:14-15)⁵⁶.

Linda’s complete dedication to the children is well expressed also in another passage in her story: the time when her son, Benjamin, is a one-year-old boy and gets really sick, and in her heart she believes it is best for him to not survive. “I could never forget that he was a slave. Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy. [...] Alas, what mockery it is for a slaver mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery” (1861: 96).

Exemplary and explicit for this theme is Toni Morrison who, besides *Beloved*, focuses on motherhood and women’s roles also in other literary work, such as *A Mercy*⁵⁷. Most of the time, the external brutality of slavery that surrounds and shatters the mother-daughter bond has catastrophic implications, starting with the possible separation of the children from their mother, which can have devastating psychological repercussions. This type of “destruction” is frequently turned into other forms of violence, as in the case of the large number of infanticides.

Frances Ellen Harper wrote a significant poem in 1859⁵⁸:

I will save my precious children
From their darkly threatened doom,
I will hew their path to freedom
Through the portals of the tomb.
A moment in the sunlight,
She held a glimmering knife,
The next moment she had bathed it
In the crimson fount of life.

Infanticide was an act of rebellion because it allowed enslaved women to prevent the enslavement of their children (due to the *partus sequitur ventrum*). This is nevertheless

⁵⁶ Li. “Motherhood as Resistance in Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” 14-15..

⁵⁷ Considered the prelude of *Beloved*, published in 2008 and set two centuries before at the beginning of the slavery commerce.

⁵⁸ In “The Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio” (1859), Harper paints slavery as the enemy of all maternal images capturing it as something that deliberately suppresses and strips women of their rights to motherhood and womanhood (www.shenandoahliterary.org)

considered as a real common phenomenon between enslaved mothers, and it has been the subject of many researches and studies of historians who were trying to draw conclusions about their numbers and the “social behavior surrounding the commission of and response to infanticide” as Kenneth Wheeler explains in his *Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century Ohio*. Additionally, he makes the point that, in contrast to other violent causes to death, like adulthood suicide or homicide, “infanticides are easily concealed” because the victim is small, vulnerable, can be easily killed and quickly hidden (infanticide, in fact, usually occurs right after the baby is delivered or when the victim has no family to report the disappearance). As far as we can know, cases of infanticide are often written in autobiographies but mostly recalled in neo-slave narratives or visual representation of them (such as in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, which became a tv series based on the homonymous novel and, like in our case, in *Beloved*).

“On January 26, 1856, a bleak, bitterly cold day, as federal marshals closed in on a Cincinnati cabin near the banks of a frozen Ohio River, the escaped slave mother Margaret Garner killed her two-year-old daughter Mary with a single knife cut to her throat, then slashed her four and six-year-old sons until they scrambled under a bed to safety, Seizing a shovel, she delivered a blow to the face of her infant daughter before being restrained by marshals who had crashed through the cabin door”⁵⁹. Later, the Cincinnati Gazette revealed the woman’s confession: “[...] She and the others complain of cruel treatment on the part of their master and allege that as the cause of their attempted escape”⁶⁰.

In Julie Baiard analysis, there are other examples of infanticide in American narrative history such as the case of Lou Smith, a former slave woman living in Oklahoma who committed infanticide to her mulatto infant “because she knew that her master and mistress had plans to sell it”.

When, in *Beloved*, Morrison brings up Sethe’s infanticide, the reader is allowed to experience the murder’s paradoxical nature. Sethe, who escaped the cruel slave master Schoolteacher, is about to be captured so she commits infanticide Her humanity has been so violated by this man, and by her entire experience as a slave woman, that she kills her daughter to save her from a similar fate. She kills her to save her from psychic death: “If

⁵⁹ McLaurin. “Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South,” 250.

⁶⁰ Baird. “A Love “Too Thick”: Slave Mothers and Infanticide,” 4.

I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (1987:231). The guilt of Sethe belongs to a mother who feels sorry for not having enough milk, or enough life to nourish and perhaps even not enough love to give to her own children⁶¹. Marianne Hirsch, in her recent book *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, writes that "when Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children lives, no voice in their upbringing"⁶².

⁶¹ Caesar. "Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," 115.

⁶² Hirsch. *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 196.

Chapter 3: psychological trauma

In the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud describes a pattern of suffering for which catastrophic events seem to repeat again and again for those who have passed through them and, most importantly, against their very wills. The comparison, made from the author, can be found in the actions of Tancred (character of Torquato Tasso's romantic epic *Jerusalem Liberated*, 1581) who "unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda" in an unconscious act given by trauma. Cathy Caruth, who includes this passage in her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), adds that Tancred's story is the "enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound", a voice that bears testimony to the truth of the past⁶³. The wound – called "trauma", continues Freud, is something inflicted upon the mind rather than the body. It is not "simple and healable" because it occurred "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" and it is not made available to the conscious mind until it is imposed once more in the nightmares and in the repetitive behaviors of those who survived it.

Through this essay we have already revealed that one of the most common psychological consequences for enslaved mothers is child's infanticide or heavy effects given from the separation (i.e., when the children are sold to another slaveholder: a situation that takes them away from the family, most of the time permanently). What we didn't express, instead, is the generic and inevitable effect and trauma given by the institution of slavery itself: the loss of loved ones, the ghosts of slavery that continue to haunt also after being freed or having escaped captivity and, last but not least, the legacy of slavery in people and through centuries until today.

⁶³ Caruth. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History," 3.

The ghosts of loved ones

As we have previously carefully examined, *Incidents* and *Beloved* are about slavery in two entirely different ways: they take different stances when it comes to issues such as death and showing compassion and affection to dead loved ones or departed family members and personal trauma.

In the former, Linda confronts death's ghosts in a metaphorical sense: she includes the deaths of the father, the mother, of a dear friend, but she also describes:

- The death of hope, when she was transferred to a different enslaver who was meant to guard her and her family – after her mother's passing – but entirely disregarded this agreement; or in the case of her grandmother, who spent most of her life serving the small community with devotion and eventually was sold at auction too;
- The loss of dignity, discussing her pain for her being a woman object of the master's inappropriate behavior and remarks, which endangered her moral integrity;
- The loss of freedom, experienced by those who are in captivity.

In the latter, the spirit of the baby girl (the venom) haunts Sethe and Denver in their own home, in the first part of the novel. When *Beloved* shows up, she is far more than the beloved daughter Sethe once killed: she represents 1) the *Sixty Million and More*⁶⁴ victims of slavery turning *Beloved* into a “collective tragedy which, as history, must be remembered and redeemed”, 2) a personal story of loss and 3) Sethe's past, that she is forced to deal together with shame, pain, and the real consequences of her actions as soon as she comes face to face with *Beloved*⁶⁵.

While Sethe's encounter with her daughter's ghost is literal and overtly supernatural, Linda's confrontation is more about the legacy of death and it is portrayed via the psychological and emotional toll of enslavement⁶⁶.

⁶⁴ In *Beloved*'s dedication, Toni Morrison writes *Sixty Million and More*. Scholars have been debating about the real meaning of the sentence and one of their hypothesis is that it might represent the estimated number of black people who died during the Atlantic Slave Trade. The word “more” goes beyond American slavery's line, arguing that Morrison is dedication the written memory to the countless victims of the Holocaust, comparing the two phenomena and raising more questions about the appropriateness of such a juxtaposition presented by this statement.

⁶⁵ Moglen. “Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,” 23.

⁶⁶ Toll (n) is the extent of loss, damage, suffering, etc., resulting from some action or calamity

Beloved's remark "anything dead coming back to life hurts" (1987:46) literally signals her being a reincarnation, the physical manifestation of suppressed memories: the character is both pain, Sethe's most painful memory, and cure because her mother is able, through the novel, to redeem and motivate her actions to the detriment of the direct concerned.

According to the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, the three phases of trauma recovery, that may be caused by traumatic incidents such as active combat, a nearly fatal accident, a natural disaster, a critical illness, or physical assault, are: 1) safety and stability, 2) remembering and grieving and 3) restoring relationships ⁶⁷. We can highlight this structure in the novel as Sethe's healing process and remembrance after the trauma of slavery and, mostly, after her child's infanticide.

Firstly, we witness to the arrival of Paul D (one of the Sweet Home's enslaved man, together with other five – named Paul A, Paul F, Sixo, Sethe and her husband Halle) and then Beloved. In her conflicting responsibilities as a former slave and a mother, Sethe is compelled to confront her history. Paul D encourages her to recollect and leave to him some of the incidents of her past. The truth is that neither of them is capable of facing what would enable them to hear and listen to one another:

"How are they?"

We get along.

What about inside?"

I don't go inside.

Sethe, if I'm here with you [...] you can go anywhere you want. [...] Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out" (1987:58)

This part's culmination is Sethe revealing her murder in the last chapters.

"She was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and their wings. [...] Collected every bite of life she had made [...] and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil. [...] Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on" (1987:190)

Secondly, there is Sethe's redemption period: she is completely inside her past and isolated in the house together with Beloved that, constantly asking questions, repeatedly forces her to endure all the suffering and humiliation hold over her years.

⁶⁷ University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPCM - <https://share.upmc.com>).

Finally, there is a reader's ritual "clearing" as well as the protagonist's: Sethe experiences a repetition of her scene of trauma but, this time, she turns her violent hand toward the white man who endangered her child. The novel's ritual is successfully obtained thanks to the comic relief of the conversation of Paul D and Stamp Paid, Denver searching for help outside 124's walls and the hopeful reunion of Sethe and Paul. Morrison, in her essay *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* says that "as the reader leaves the book, we have taken on slavery's haunt as our own" ⁶⁸.

Together with the ghost-woman, acting as a psychological catalyst ⁶⁹ for the three central characters, there is another ghost who is impelling the healing process: Baby Suggs, as the ritual guide in the Clearing. This is "a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place" where Baby Suggs, every Saturday afternoon was used to sit "on a huge flat-sided rock", to bend her head and to recite preachers quietly (1987:103). As included in Linda Krumholz's volume, the metaphor of the Clearing implies the act of brining the unconscious memories into the conscious mind and negotiating their crippling grip. Morrison uses this technique in the in order to include the Freudian psychoanalytic process of healing ⁷⁰.

Slavery ghosts

For those who have survived the collective trauma of racism, "the day's serious work is beating back the past" (1993:24)⁷¹

American literature demonstrates the profound effects that slavery, especially the denial of one's identity as a human subject, has on the external world with deep repercussions also in the internal world. These resonances are so strong that, even if one is ultimately freed and released from an unbreakable bondage, the true self will be trapped in an inner reality that prevents them from a genuine experience of freedom. As an example of this statement, in *Beloved's* account of the first twenty-eight days of Sethe's arrival at the 124, the narrator tells the reader about her habits inside the house and outside

⁶⁸ Morrison, T. *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: the Afro-American Presence in American Literature* (University of Michigan, 1988), 32.

⁶⁹Catalyst: someone or something that brings a change in a specific situation.

⁷⁰ Krumholz. "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," 397.

⁷¹ Moglen. "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," 24.

in the Clearing, “through the waiting for Halle”, claiming that “freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (1987:112).

Morrison draws a comparison between a historical or national process and an individual’s psychological healing, in *Beloved*. Sethe says:

If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened” (1987:47)

Since Sethe’s individual memories remain in the world as pieces of historical memory, the individual process of rememory can be replicated on a historical level.

Among the many facets that slavery left as a consequence, there is sexual trauma that has been explored not just in *Incidents* and *Beloved* but also in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and other now canonical African American novels like Edwige Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and Gary Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975).

The former author, an emigrate from Haite to the United States in the early 1980s, writes about young girl Sophie’s journeys between the Antilles and New York City. The novel highlights the value of black family and the solid communal foundation of the rural town from which the family originated despite rape and childbirth traumas that remain as a legacy of slavery in the Caribbean. In fact, many elements of Haitian culture resonate with African American traditions pointing out “a common diasporic culture and its connections to Africa”: examples are “othermothers” who rear children and fieldworkers that are used to sing songs in the call-and-response tradition ⁷². But the most crucial theme through the novel is sexuality: Sophie is traumatized by the practice of testing. It was a Haitian custom for mothers to “test” their daughters’ virginity in order to protect them from the violence of men, but this simply resulted in a more severe suffering and subtle forms of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in the daughters. As soon Sophie asks her grandmother Ifé the reason why generations of mothers continue on testing their daughter she responds that “everything a mother does, she does for her child’s own good” (1994:102).

⁷² Call-and-response is a musical technique but, applied in slavery context, it represents the slave music made for communication and coordination with labor. The text were always about the oppressiveness of the masters or the hard work.

Jones writes about Ursa, the protagonist, a descendant of Brazilian slave women, who tells about their incestuous rape at the hand of their owners to each generation during Brazilian slavery-period. This generational tale of *Corregidora* is about women's suffering for being treated as a sex object rather than human being; furthermore, through a frank language of sexuality, we find an exploration of the legacy of psychosexual abuse that black women inherited and their commitment to "make generations to witness slavery's brutality" (that, eventually, will fall for the protagonist who will start her new tradition)⁷³.

Returning to the cast of *Beloved*, Paul D uses the expression "little tobacco tin" to allude to his heart, which experienced severe psychological tragedies that pushed him to a condition of repression, as a striking example of a person's indefinite bondage to slavery. Additionally, due to the sexually abusive behaviors of his owners, Paul D learnt that sexuality is a tool to employ for survival and control situations. We know in the novel about his "chain gang" and the exemplary passage with which Morrison attempts to illustrate genderless sexual exploitation:

Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D did not know that then. He was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves', as he stood before the man kneeling in mist on his right. Convinced he was next, Paul D retched – vomiting up nothing at all. (1987:127)

Sexual trauma is deeply explored also through second-level characters: Ella has perhaps the most sexually impactful trauma of any others, "giving her a disgust for sex as a horrible thing". She is one of the first to welcome Sethe to Bluestone Road after her escape and, together with Stamp Paid, finds a place safe to stay also for Sethe's newly born. Sethe, in the middle of a conversation with Denver and speculating on what might have happened to Beloved (such as being "locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door"), compares:

Something like that had happened to Ella except it was two men – a father and a son – and Ella remembered every bit of it. For more than a year, they kept her locked in a room for themselves. "You couldn't think up," Ella had said, "what them two done to me." (1987:139)

Ella had been beaten evert way but down. She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake, and the scars from the belt were thick as rope around her waist. She had delivered, but

⁷³ Beaulieu, A. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (Greenwood, 1999), chapter 5.

would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by “the lowest yet”. It lived five days never making a sound. (1987:298)

Post-trauma today

John Edgar Wideman prefaces the novel *Sent For You yesterday* (1983):

Past lives in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirits of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest.

He insists in the interdependence of past and present, also asking “what is history except people’s imaginary recreation?”. Toni Morrison follows the lead saying that “if we don’t keep in touch with the ancestor...we are, in fact, lost” meaning that keeping in touch with the past is the work of a reconstructive memory⁷⁴. This memory can be easy or can be traumatic. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the most recent response of the American Psychiatric Association to a variety of traumatic experiences such as “rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on” (acknowledged in 1980). It may be understood as a “symptom of history” because “the traumatized carry an impossible story within them”⁷⁵.

What is the situation in the United States, and abroad, if we talk about American slavery today? How are we remembering this phenomenon and the countless victims who lost their lives to this historical tragedy?

In Colson Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad*, we witness Cora, the protagonist, being transferred from her job with the Andersons (her master) to a job at the Museum of Natural Wonders where she works as an “actor” in three of the museum exhibits: one portrays the “Darkest Africa” prior to captivity, another the life on a slave ship and the last one is about the life of a plantation slave. This museum was solely created for white peoples to show black people working on plantations and suffering (in the series made from the novel, there is also a whipping scene).

Across the country of United States, we can find landmarks, or abroad we can visit many museums such as The International Slavery Museum (in Liverpool, UK). Here,

⁷⁴ Rushdy. “Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, ” 567. *American Literature*, vol. 64, no. 3, pp. 567-569

⁷⁵ Caruth. “Introduction. Exploration in Memory, ” 5.

I want to discuss some examples to give general information and more space to the reader, in order to reflect about the ethical meaning and function of these places.

In Ferrisburgh (Vermont) we can visit Rokeby: the home and farm-stead of the Robinsons from 1793 to 1961, an important radical abolitionist, quaker family and part of the Underground Railroad network⁷⁶. The important part of the story of this house is Rowland Thomas Robinson's shelter for fugitives and his help to runaways is well documented in the museum's collection (the house is now a museum) of 10,000 documents including letters from abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison. There we can study and collect more information along the documentation of one slaveholder's attempt to get a fugitive back to work to the fields⁷⁷.

Another example of landmark, completely different, is Fort Mose Historic State Park and known as "Negroe Fort" on the maps. This is a significant and recognized national and international historic landmark that dedicate the memory to all the courageous Africans escaped from enslavement arriving in 1687 (the first freedom seekers) opening the road to 100 by 1738. The museum is in Saint Augustine (Florida) and it is a "living history museum" that commemorates the legacy and achievements of America's first free black community⁷⁸.

Outside the States, one of the most influential museum is the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, that "increases the understanding of transatlantic, chattel and other forms of enslavement" through collections, researches, and supporting activism about human rights issues. It opened significantly on the 23rd of August 2007 and its aim is to highlight the historical and contemporary importance of slavery focusing on freedom and enslavement. The date of foundation is significative firstly because the year 2007 was the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade act but mostly because the day was designated by UNESCO as Slavery Remembrance Day⁷⁹.

⁷⁶ The Underground Railroad network was a train line, entirely build underground, that helped fugitives escape from the South to the free states of the North, thanks to many abolitionists.

⁷⁷ Rokeby Museum (<https://rokeby.org>).

⁷⁸ Fort Mose Historic State Park (<https://fortmose.org>).

⁷⁹ 23rd August represents the anniversary of the revolt of enslaved Africans in the Island of S. Domingue (modern Haiti) in 1791 representing a crucial event in the fight against slavery (liverpoolmuseums.org.uk).

Conclusion

The institution of slavery in the United States left an indelible mark on the lives of enslaved people and their descendants. The trauma of slavery manifested itself in various ways over generations, including brutal violence and cultural disruption (especially in the early years after the abolition of enslavement). One of the crucial aspects of the African American experience during slavery is the challenge to the mother-daughter bond as something that provides a sense of security, love, and belonging - something that the institution itself disrupted. The separation of mothers and daughters through auction or the escapes to the North, strained the bond and became a major source of unhealed trauma.

While both *Incidents* and *Beloved* explore the trauma of slavery in some common themes, this thesis highlighted the differences between their tone, style, other narrative devices, and the female condition, motherhood, and the bond with children. Finally, it explored slavery as the bearer of many unwanted feelings for those who, even after freedom, continue to live in its shadows.

The choice of these two books was made to these two because *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an autobiography, and its authenticity is not debatable when the teller of the story has experienced it directly; *Beloved*, on the other hand, is a closed box that needs to be unlocked more and more each time you read it, to discover a broad and often obscure truth.

Talking about slavery is not as easy as it sounds. Because the subject is heavy and, above all, because it deals with real events, it is necessary to document them before speaking about them. Some of the memories, written personally or not – biographies or neo-slave novels - are really hard to read and understand. It is hard to believe to the idea that something like that happened and that many people suffered unjustifiably. I felt this difficulty while reading slaves' narratives, stopping my reading many times for a strange but strong discomfort that manifested itself only to imagine in my mind the whipping scenes, all the disrespect, and other types of violences (mostly sexual ones) that the enslaved people suffered while in captivity to their owners.

What I hoped for, when I thought about the project of this thesis, was to teach and educate my readers about a subject that not everyone knows deeply. Learning from history is useful, but only up to a point: it is made much more effective only when we learn from mistakes and do not repeat them, adopt behaviors that go in the opposite direction, or others that are designed to completely avoid making the same mistakes. In fact, today we know other examples called forced labor or sex trafficking (including facets involving minors) that are presented as “modern slavery”; they may be different from the Atlantic slave trade, not going “so far”, but they recall similar violence and traumas.

I remember reading in *Beloved* that “whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle” (1987:229). This statement represents the harshest prejudice, and it holds in itself the truth about slavery. I want this work of mine to be a wish for the future, a place with more respect for each other’s differences and a place where racism is completely eradicated.

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The Underground Railroad, based on the 2016 Colson Whitehead’s novel. 2021. Miniseries premiered on Amazon Prime Video created by Barry Jenkins.

Summary in Italian

Se si ci riferisce alla schiavitù americana, si allude di conseguenza alla pagina di storia che è segnata dall'arrivo della prima nave schiavista in Virginia, nel 1619, con la successiva istituzione legale della schiavitù – nel 1641 – da parte della colonia americana del Massachusetts, comprendendo anche il momento in cui lo stato del Virginia rinforza l'istituzione, nel 1661-1662 circa, con la prima legge basata sulla dottrina del *partus sequitur ventrem* dove il figlio segue la condizione della madre. Il legame della schiavitù è, in numerosi modi, ancora presente nella vita americana di oggi.

Questa tesi è stata strutturata con il principale obiettivo di comparare e di mettere in contrasto due testi letterari tra le colonne portanti della letteratura americana sul tema della schiavitù: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) di Harriet Jacobs e *Beloved* (1987) di Toni Morrison. In realtà, il primo appartiene alla narrativa schiavista del primo periodo mentre il secondo è un esempio del cosiddetto secondo periodo (che emerge dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale e in maniera particolare negli anni '60-'70 del Novecento). Le caratteristiche di ciascuno sono molto diverse e vengono qui analizzate.

Verrà sostenuta un'attività comparativa tra le due narrazioni, su come i loro principali personaggi, Linda e Sethe, sono costruiti, portando esempi da altri testi chiave della letteratura Afro-Americana, e come è da ognuna di queste viene sviluppata l'esperienza dei personaggi chiamati "schiavi". Dopo una breve introduzione dei romanzi e tramite la capitolazione, il presente elaborato va ad evidenziare differenze e somiglianze nei fulcri e nelle strutture degli stessi, il processo di creazione di creazione della protagonista "donna" (analizzando in maniera più vicina il rapporto madre-figlia); infine, sono analizzati gli aspetti psicologici della schiavitù e come questi si manifestino sia come spiriti delle persone care mancate e come trauma che continua ad ossessionare gli schiavi anche dopo essersi o essere stati liberati. La conclusione vuole, invece, porre attenzione alla situazione attuale negli Stati Uniti d'America.