

Justice and Race in the Narrative of the American Slave and Toni Morrison's *Favourite* by Frederick Douglass

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Abstract: This article is interested in justice and race in two African American novels: Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Going from the quest of profit, we highlight the instrumentalization of the law by the Whites to the detriment of the black community. Violence is institutionalized and it causes many catastrophic consequences which destroy and disperse Negroes who are hardly exploited by the masters like Mr. Garner and Schoolteacher in *Beloved*, and Colonel Lloyd and Mr. Auld in *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*. Like in a capitalistic society, there is the class struggle opposing white masters to black slaves who represent the lower class or the proletarians. The relationships between the races have been endangered causing the death and the flight of many Negroes who run away from the place of their ill treatments or tortures. Because of the rudeness and cruelty of Schoolteacher, the Sweet Home men flee the plantation of Sweet Home, which engenders the loss of Sixo and the scattering of the family. In parallel, Douglass tells his flight from his master's plantation with John and Freddy before he is caught and submitted to punishment. Douglass and Morrison emphasize the institutionalization of violence and the class struggle to appease the social climate prevailing in America by insisting on the moralization of human relationships.

Keywords: Class struggle; institutionalization; instrumentalization; law

1. Introduction

African American literature often raises the questions of justice and racial discrimination which remain a big concern for the black community. From the first writers to the most recent ones, the central issue in their texts turns around racial equality. Two writers among them draw our attention in this study, Frederick Douglass and Toni Morrison. Both of them belong to two different generations or periods, but there is a certain continuity in the themes developed and their commitment to defend the cause of the black community in America.

Douglass was famous for his commitment and determination to liberate himself and his community. As a black slave, he dedicated all his life to the cause of his fellow - bonded people. In his *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*¹, the central issue turns around slavery and the hardships, humiliations and ill - treatments undergone by Negroes on the masters plantations or farms. He shows how, because of unfair laws, slaves are kept ignorant and dominated by white people who refuse them the right to access education, have equal opportunities, be able to possess even one's own children, marry freely with the person of one's love, etc.

Douglass's text deals a lot with the violations of Negroes' rights. It seems to address the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America where, Young Virginian Thomas Jefferson stated in 1776, "We hold these truths to be self evident; that all Men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent & inalienable rights,

that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"²

In contrast to this declaration, Douglass addresses the inequality among races in his autobiographical *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*. He indicates that this inequality exists simply because there are many anti - black and discriminatory laws which plunge Negroes in a position of dependence.

In parallel with Douglass, the 1993 Nobel Prize of literature, Morrison writes to defend the most vulnerable layers of American society. In *Beloved*, the central issues turn around black slavery which, by being institutionalized, makes Negroes undergo the most horrible experiences of their lives. Not only are they humiliated and tortured physically and morally, but they are also victims of murder and dismantling of their families. Like the Negroes in Douglass's text, they have no rights. Even the possession of their families is forbidden to them and it is for this reason that a black woman like Sethe prefers the death of her children rather than being deprived of them. For her, it is out of the question that slave masters separate her from her children. She believes that the afterlife is better than being a slave in America. She then kills her first daughter Beloved and tries, in vain, to do the same with the other kids.

The murder of Sethe on her daughter raises the questions of fairness in *Beloved*.³ While many readers are addressing the fair or unfair character of this act, others are asking the

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.

² Roger L. Ransom, *Conflict and Compromise: The Political Economy of Slavery, Emancipation, and the American Civil War*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 18.

³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, New York, The Penguin Group, 1987.

questions of who is wrong and who is right between Sethe and her master, Schoolteacher. Does Sethe, on behalf of love and freedom, have the right to kill another human being, even though the latter is her own daughter? But does the Schoolteacher, on behalf of taking back his fugitive slaves, have the permission to push a woman to kill her child? Here are many questions which are very debatable and connected to the immersion of the law in the text of Morrison.

In *Beloved* and *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, law has so much influenced and oriented the turn of events that it deserves to be revised. Many questions should be asked concerning this revision: Who decided of the law in that American period? Did it have a general character or was it simply personalized? By hinting at law in their novels, Douglass and Morrison tackle the issue of justice and racial conflicts. In many situations, they seem to defend that justice should go beyond simple words and should be related to goodness or moral attitude.

In this article, our objective is to show how, through the quest of profit, American justice has been instrumentalized to the detriment of the black community. Material aspirations are at the basis of many racial conflicts opposing masters to slaves. They are also the source of unlawful and unfair laws which facilitate white supremacy and cause black subjection and submission for long. Douglass and Morrison highlight the institutionalization of violence which dangerously impacts the lives of black characters, who wage a rude battle to liberate themselves against white domination, hence the class struggle opposing masters to slaves. They also write to urge people to moralize human relationships.

1) The Institutionalization of violence

The question of race in America has always been a topical and controversial issue. Because of the interests that vary from one race to another, violence is so institutionalized that it leads to a very hot social climate. The texts of Douglass and Morrison deal with this dramatic situation which existed between Whites and Blacks during the time of slavery. One of the most important causes of conflicts among races is the institutionalization of black slavery, which, destroys and plunge black families in a very harmful situation as Bennett Jr states in the following passage:

Behind this cotton curtain four million human beings were systematically deprived of every right of personality. Vice, immorality and brutality were institutionalized. The sanctity of the family was violated; children were sold of mothers and fatherhood, in effect, was outlawed. The rape of a slave woman, a Mississippi court ruled, is an offense unknown to common or civil law.⁴

In *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave* and *Beloved*, there is a discrimination based on race. As in a society with classes, the second roles are always played by Negroes who are simply considered talking chattel. It is in this sense that the Schoolteacher, while

alluding Sethe in *Beloved*, asks his nephews to classify her characteristics. He orders them: " No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up."⁵

By denying Sethe's humanity, Schoolteacher, to a certain extent, follows the steps of Mr. Garner, his predecessor on the plantation of Sweet Home. The same distinction done on Sethe's human and animal characteristics has been done previously by Mr. Garner who believes that his slaves "were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home"⁶ and "one step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race"⁷

Both Mr. Garner and the Schoolteacher deprive slaves of their dignity by considering their animal characteristics. The same situation is, somehow, present in *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*, with a heritage story where animals and Negroes receive the same treatments and seem to have the same values in the masters' eyes. After the death of Douglass's master, Captain Anthony, the properties (slaves as well as animals) are to be shared between his son, Andrew and his daughter, Lucretia. During this division, slaves and animals have received the same treatment as is witnessed by Douglass:

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination.⁸

This event or scenario is used by Douglass to show how Negroes have been devalored by white people during the time of bondage. In many passages in the text, horses for example, are better treated than slaves. As is illustrated in the following paragraph, Negroes are less valuable than horses: "The slightest inattention to these {horses} was unpardonable, and was visited upon those, under whose care they were placed, with the severest punishment; no excuse could shield them, if the colonel only suspected any want of attention to his horses."⁹

To be a horse at Colonel Lloyd plantation is better than to be a slave. Unlike Negroes who are humiliated and tortured night and day, horses are treated in a noble and good way. Not only are they fed properly, but any slave who neglects them should receive a rude punishment.

Both in *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave* and *Beloved*, the institutionalization of black ignorance is a reality. In fact, as a general rule applied to all slaves in America, it is forbidden to Negroes to learn how to read and write. This institutionalization is written by Thomas Sowell in *Ethnic America: a history*:

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, op. cit., p. 193.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, op. cit., p. 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴ Bennett Lerone Jr. *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, Sixth Edition, Penguin Books, by Johnson Publishing Co. Inc. 1987, p. 87.

The central feature of any slave system_ preventing escape_ was accomplished in the antebellum South, not by fences or guards, but by keeping the slave ignorant, dependent, and in fear. The overwhelming majority of slaves could neither read nor write, and most Southern states made it a crime to teach them¹⁰ (Sowell, 1981, p.187).

The learning and teaching of a slave is strictly prohibited by American law. Douglass has lived this situation in his master's compound, Mr. Auld. Leaving the countryside for the city, he has been offered the opportunity of living like a white child. Thanks to Mrs. Auld, his master's wife, he starts learning to read and write. He is very pleased with this new situation which will increase his humanity. But unfortunately, it is not going to last, since, Mr. Auld discourages his wife from teaching him thinking that the education of a slave would only cause him harm. He states:

If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master_ to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now, said he [Mr. Auld], "If you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm."¹¹

For Mr. Auld, as well as many slaveholders, a good slave should be ignorant. Black ignorance is then institutionalized, what makes Christopher Freeburg allude some scientists, like Agassiz, who defend: "the weak mental capacity of blacks and the necessity of maintaining all laws and customs that restrict them from social and political participation"¹² It is as if knowledge is white and should be reserved to white people only.

The institutionalization of black ignorance is also a reality in Morrison's *A Mercy*. In this novel, the discrimination about black education is sadly remarkable. It is clearly defended that teaching a black person is considered a crime by the law. However, a white preacher named Reverend Father teaches black characters how to read and write. Despite all the threats on his life and his freedom, he is very determined to teach Florens, her brother and mother because he is deeply convinced that only education is the key to a happy and successful life. As is expressed in the passage below, he hides to teach them:

We are baptized and can have happiness when this life is done. The Reverend Father tells us that. Once every seven days we learn to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so the four of us hide near the marsh. My mother, me, her little boy and Reverend Father. He is forbidden to do this but he teaches us anyway watching out for wicked Virginians and Protestants who want to catch him. If they do, he will be in prison or pay money or both. He has two

¹⁰ Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America: a History*, New Delhi, Basic Books, Inc. 1981, p. 187.

¹¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, op. cit., p. 39.

¹² Christopher Freeburg, *Melville and the Idea of Blackness : Race and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 97.

books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock. When the letters are memories we make whole words. I am faster than my mother and her baby boy is no good at all. Very quickly I can write from memory the Nicene Creed including all of the commas.¹³

Reverend Father is well aware of the unjust nature of the law forbidding the education of black kids. As a white preacher, he is only interested in goodness believing in the equality of people regardless of any belonging.

Apart from ignorance, Douglass and Morrison highlight the institutionalization of black poverty which is a violation of human rights. In fact, in *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* and *Beloved* no black slave has the right to possess. All of them belong to their masters as well as their descents. The slave father or mother cannot be possessive of his or her children. Even the hearts of slaves do not belong to them. According to Paul D in *Beloved*, it is too dangerous for a slave woman to love her children. He warns Sethe in these terms:

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; everything, 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. "Why?" he asked her. "Why you think you have to take up for her? Apologize for her? She's grown."¹⁴

Sethe is not ready to give up her love towards her children. She wages a very rude struggle to keep them with her. As a very possessive mother, she prefers the death of her kids than letting them return to the plantation of Sweet Home. For Sethe, death is better than life in slavery. For this deep conviction, she assassinates her first daughter and tries to do the same with her two sons Buglar, Howard and the newborn, Denver when Schoolteacher and his men accompanied with a slave catcher come to Baby Suggs's house to take them back to Sweet Home. Because of this murder, she is sent to prison leaving the rest of her family behind except Denver who is too small to be separated from her mother.

In *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, the right to possess is stolen to slaves. While Morrison seems to insist on love which is prevented to Negroes, Douglass highlights the possession of wealth. Telling his proper story, he insists on the fact that his money is always taken by his master, Hugh. This is an illustration of this injustice:

I was now getting, as I have said, one dollar and fifty cents per day. I contracted for it; I earned it; it was paid to me; it was rightfully my own; yet, upon each returning Saturday night, I was compelled to deliver every cent of that money to

¹³Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, New York, Toronto, Alfred. A. Knoff, 2008, p. 6.

¹⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, op. cit., p. 45.

Master Hugh. And why? Not because he earned it, —not because he had any hand in earning it, —not because I owed it to him, —nor because he possessed the slightest shadow of a right to it; but solely because he had the power to compel me to give it up. The right of the grim - visaged pirate upon the high seas is exactly the same.¹⁵

Another injustice capable of causing conflicts and hatred amongst races concerns the law on marriage. While white people have the right to choose a partner for life, Negroes are not allowed to get married before the law. They can have partners just to increase the livestock of slaves but their marriages have no legal values because it is never done before a law representative. In *Beloved*, for instance, the marriage between Sethe and Halle is done secretly. There is no preacher to celebrate their union, no wedding, no food or drink, no guests at all; everything is done in secret.

As illustrated in Sethe's relationship with Halle, the marriage of a slave is not valued because physical separation can occur at any moment. Partners are often sold to different masters and they take separate ways. Also, because of the work, they can be sent on different plantations without having the occasion to see each other again. Slavery and slave - trade separate black families making that some children like Denver never meet their fathers who are killed or lost for particular reasons.

In *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, the problem of slave marriage is also posed between Douglass himself and Anna Murray. As two lovers, they cannot celebrate their union in the South. Canada is then a place to be for them not only for their freedom, but also for the celebration of their union in front of an authority as witnessed by Douglass in these terms:

I thought of going to Canada; but he decided against it, and in favor of my going to New Bedford, thinking I should be able to get work there at my trade. At this time, Anna, my intended wife, came on; for I wrote to her immediately after my arrival at New York, (notwithstanding my homeless, houseless, and helpless condition,) informing her of my successful flight, and wishing her to come on forthwith. In a few days after her arrival, Mr. Ruggles called in the Rev. J. W. C. Pennington, who, in the presence of Mr. Ruggles, Mrs. Michaels, and two or three others, performed the marriage ceremony, and gave us a certificate, of which the following is an exact copy:

“This may certify that I joined together in holy matrimony Frederick Johnson and Anna Murray, as man and wife, in the presence of Mr. David Ruggles and Mrs. Michaels.¹⁶

In emphasizing his marriage with Anna Murray away from South masters, Douglass shows how slavery weakens black couples. He seems to be well aware that getting married in the South is exposing not only his couple, but also the destiny of his future children. In addition to his fight for

¹⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, op. cit., p. 97.

¹⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, op. cit., p. 106.

freedom, he stands to improve the living conditions of his fellow - slaves who are victims of unfair laws.

2) The Class Struggle: Masters vs Slaves

African American literature reserves an important part to the class struggle. Most writers now and in the past have dealt with this social issue which causes division and misunderstanding in American society. For example, in their writings, Douglass and Morrison tackle the problematic question of slavery involving two struggling classes: the white masters representing the capitalist class or bourgeoisie and the slaves embodying the proletariat or working class.

Douglass and Morrison deal with the very interesting problem of exploitation, equality and fairness existing between masters and slaves. In *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, the exploitation of black slaves by white masters is omnipresent and at the origin of many conflicts. As an homodiegetic character, Douglass condemns his exploitation by Master Hugh who forcefully takes his money.

As it is written by Stephen G. Hall, “Black abolitionists, former leaders in the rhetorical and literary war to end slavery, played an important role in producing historical writing in the years following the Civil War.”¹⁷ Douglass is one the most famous black abolitionists who, by writing a biographical novel, puts the accent on the class struggle which has opposed white masters to black slaves.

By being exploited night and day by masters like Hugh, Douglass starts dreaming of freedom. He excludes no means to liberate himself because he has the deep conviction that slavery, representing the domination of Whites on Blacks, is not good at all. With his other fellow - slaves, he fails to escape from the chains of servitude. This unsuccessful attempt of running away to the North has caused him much harm. After being caught, he is sent to prison with his comrades, Henry and John. He vainly wages a struggle of resistance against his masters as is expressed in the following passage:

During the scuffle, I managed, I know not how, to get my pass out, and, without being discovered, put it into the fire. We were all now tied; and just as we were to leave for Easton jail, Betsy Freeland, mother of William Freeland, came to the door with her hands full of biscuits, and divided them between Henry and John. She then delivered a speech, to the following effect: — addressing herself to me, she said, “You devil! You yellow devil! it was you that put it into the heads of Henry and John to run away. But for you, you longlegged mulatto devil! Henry nor John would never have thought of such a thing.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Stephen G. Hall, *A faithful account of the race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*, In. Waldo E. Martin Jr. and Patricia Sullivan, *The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2009, p. 7.

¹⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, op. cit., pp. 90-91.

The passage above shows how much slaves have suffered from injustice during the times of slavery. Without rights and protection, they are ill - treated severely and dangerously by slaveholders who enjoy whipping them. Douglass narrates the stories of Negroes who have lost part of their blood due to masters' cruelties. For instance, one of his aunts has been severely punished by his master as he says: "I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart - rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood."¹⁹ Douglass traces many conflicts between masters and slaves due to the clash of ambitions.

Like in *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, the class struggle is omnipresent in *Beloved*. Morrison shows how the clash of ambitions, through the quest of money, has disturbed the social climate between masters and slaves who cannot be friends. For example, as slaveholders, neither Mr. Garner nor Schoolteacher can create a good and serious relationship with the Sweet Home men. Because of their economic ambitions which consists in gaining the maximum possible money or profit using slaves's physical strength, they displease them by keeping them in slavery for life. All of them have contributed to the dismantling of black families. By allowing Baby Suggs to leave the plantation of Sweet Home for the house of Cincinnati, Garner separates her from her child, Halle, her daughter - in - law, Sethe and her grandchildren as stated below:

After sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone; after five years of freedom given to her by her last child, who bought her future with his, so to speak, so she could have one whether he did or not—to lose him too; to acquire a daughter and grandchildren and see that daughter slay the children (or try to); to belong to a community of other free Negroes—to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed—and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance - - - well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy.²⁰

Halle buys Baby Suggs's freedom in exchange for his own. But for Suggs, freedom does not have much meaning after sixty years spent in servitude, and after being separated from seven of her eight children. She seems to regain hope when her daughter - in - law and her grandchildren arrive in her house in Cincinnati. But this optimism does not last long because of the Schoolteacher who, by dismantling the Sweet Home men and causing the assassination of Sethe's first daughter, pushes her to let herself go to death. After feeling humiliated in her own yard, Suggs is so confused that she does not know whether life deserves to be lived or be left. This passage illustrates her confusion and moral destabilization after the incursion of Schoolteacher in the house of 124:

Baby Suggs didn't even raise her head. From her sickbed she heard them go but that wasn't the reason she lay still. It was a wonder to her that her grandsons had taken so long to realize that every house wasn't like the one on Bluestone Road. Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn't get interested in leaving life or living it, let alone the fright of two creeping - off boys. Her past had been like her present - - intolerable - - and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left for her pondering color.²¹

Baby Suggs pondering color from her sickbed represents a very important landmark in the history of black people in America. Morrison uses it to show how color has too much interest in the mentalities of the American people. It may determine the destiny of the characters who are blessed if they are white or cursed if they are black.

The discrimination based on color is so important that Douglass, like Morrison, retraces it in his text. To show how color is essential in racial relations in America, he witnesses: "I speak advisedly when I say this, —that killing a slave, or any colored person, in Talbot county, Maryland, is not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community."²² This witness determines the contemptuous behavior of American people towards Negroes who are taken for animals to use for the benefit of masters. Douglass pursues this contempt in these terms:

Just as I got to the house, in looking out at the lane gate, I saw four white men, with two colored men. The white men were on horseback, and the colored ones were walking behind, as if tied. I watched them a few moments till they got up to our lane gate. Here they halted, and tied the colored men to the gate - post.²³

The passage above shows the difficulty to be a Negro or black person in America. In fact, blackness goes with a lot of victimization and humiliation. It means being plotted night and day without assistance from the courts or the community. Morrison goes further relating Americanization or Americanism with race. Being considered foreigners in their own country, Negroes fight to make the term applicable to themselves as defended by Morrison in *Playing in the dark: whiteness and literary imagination*:

As a metaphor for transaction the whole process of Americanization, while buying its particular racial ingredients, this Africanist presence may be something the United States cannot do without. Deep within the word "Americanism" is its association with race. To identify someone as a South African is to say very little; we need the adjective "white" or "black" or "colored" to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white, and Africanist people struggle to

²¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

²² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, op. cit., p. 37.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁰ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, op. cit., p. 177.

make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen.²⁴

The class struggle is an omnipresent reality in *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave and Beloved*. Due to many factors, especially the quest for profit and the desire of domination from white people, it questions the judiciary system of the United States of America which should be ameliorated for a harmonious and peaceful society.

3) The Moralization of Human relationships

In America, the impartiality of justice has always been questioned. Many observers of the American social evolution agree on the fact that the race criterion is very determining in the decision of the police and justice, in a general way. It is in this sense that Ronald Weitzer and Steven A. Tuch (2006, p.5) write the passage below:

Whites and blacks tend to perceive the criminal justice system in America in strikingly different terms. Indeed, race is one of the strongest predictors of attitudes toward the courts and police. Blacks are more inclined than whites to believe that the police abuse citizens, treat minorities more harshly than whites, and are not held accountable for misconduct.²⁵

Ronald Weitzer and Steven A. Tuch criticized American justice. According to them, Whites and Blacks do not have the same treatment in front of the law. This situation is not, in reality, to pacify the social peace by installing a good climate amongst races. It has urged the class struggle or the clash of ambitions. It is therefore necessary to call American citizens for the pacification of human relationships and the reconciliation of races in America.

Between Whites and Blacks, the climate has often been tense. As justice seems to fail playing a balanced role amongst American people, literature comes to the rescue to appease the social climate which has been very tense, so far. For example, through the writings of African American authors such as Douglass and Morrison, the accent is put on morality. Both authors emphasize good and evil.

In Douglass's *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, the notions of good and evil are omnipresent through the enslavement of Negroes who are victims of a lot of discrimination. In stressing these bad behaviors from White masters, Douglass's objective is not to cultivate hatred and revenge amongst races, but to urge people to learn from their past mistakes. He then makes the comparison between Mr. Severe and Mr. Hopkins, just to show that goodness should prevail upon cruelty as illustrated below:

Mr. Severe's place was filled by a Mr. Hopkins. He was a very different man. He was less cruel, less profane, and

made less noise, than Mr. Severe. His course was characterized by no extraordinary demonstrations of cruelty. He whipped, but seemed to take no pleasure in it. He was called by the slaves a good overseer.²⁶

Douglass seems to be convinced that the social tension could not be avoided if black people are still kept in ignorance. For him, the acquisition of knowledge seems to be more important than the acquisition of profit and it should be democratized. Wealth as desired by white masters is very important, but most of the time it determines the changes of mood of the characters. It dominates and influences the attitude of people so that they sometimes forget about ethics which is necessary for the building of a peaceful and harmonious society in which all groups have their places and can live more appropriately. In *the Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (1864 - 1920), a German sociologist, philosopher and political economist writes:

Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfactions of his material needs. This, according to Weber, is the essence of the spirit of modern capitalism.²⁷

While most white people or masters grant much importance to riches, Douglass raises the issues of universal values which are essential to gather all human beings. He is convinced that there are good people amongst Whites. He praises the human qualities of his mistress, Mrs. Auld as followed:

My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door, — a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. She had never had a slave under her control previously to myself, and prior to her marriage she had been dependent upon her own industry for a living. She was by trade a weaver; and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery. I was utterly astonished at her goodness.²⁸

Through the characters of Mr. Severe and Mrs. Auld, Douglass launches an important message to his readers. Not only does he want to show that good guys exist amongst white people, but he calls all cruel men to get rid of the forces of evil by treating people fairly and equally. He rejects any feeling of hatred and disdain amongst races by cultivating the spirit of tolerance, comprehension and mutual help.

In using little white boys to learn how to read and write, Douglass tries to show that men were not born with a feeling of hatred and cruelty towards others. Learning from the white children of his age is proof that the world of children is better than that of adults. In this world, the notions of race

²⁴ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: whiteness and the literary imagination*, New York, 1st Vintage Books Ed, 1992, p. 47.

²⁵ Ronald Weitzer, Steven A. Tuch, *Race And Policing In America: Conflict and Reform*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 5.

²⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, op. cit., p. 23.

²⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, p. 4.

²⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, op. cit., p. 40.

and class do not exist. All are equal in the society and have a sense of solidarity and sharing. It is for this reason that they share their knowledge with Douglass, who gives them bread, which is a way of creating win - win partnership. No one needs to eliminate or humiliate others to exist. It is as if the existence of the ones largely depends on the others.

In parallel with Douglass, Morrison, through many circumstances, tries to reconcile white and black races in *Beloved*. Using the situation of a runaway slave, Sethe, giving birth in the woods and being assisted by a white girl, Amy Denver, she delivers an important message to humanity. This event is highly talkative and very telling in so far as it expresses the absence of hatred and racism in the mind of the white girl who, in helping a black woman deliver in the middle of the bush, has simply accomplished a humanizing action. She so much wants to immortalize this event that she orders Sethe to tell the newborn who helped during the delivery. Here are the terms she uses:

"She's never gonna know who I am. You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world?" She lifted her chin, looked off into the place where the sun used to be. "You better tell her. You hear? Say Miss Amy Denver. Of Boston."²⁹

After the delivery, Sethe is so grateful that she names her daughter after Miss Amy Denver, of Boston. This situation expresses Morrison's wish to see humanity and race relationships. Like Amy Denver, each should be eager to assist others in all circumstances. Solidarity should prevail in all human relations independently of any belonging to a race or an ethnic group.

Morrison also rejects any discrimination based on the color of the skin. She praises universal values such as compassion and solidarity to come to the rescue of the most vulnerable layers of the society. Her aspiration to reconcile races is not limited to the relations between Whites and Blacks. It is extended to people of the same race. For example, after she murders her daughter, Sethe has been isolated by the black community for many years. She has lost her two sons, Buglar and Howard, while her mother - in - law, Baby Suggs, who cannot bear the misfortune that kills her family, has been collapsing little by little.

Sethe is Living with Denver, her only child left, while her house is haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter who, eighteen years after her assassination, comes in the flesh to take up her revenge on her. This return wakes up the solidarity of the black community, especially a group of thirty women who come to 124 to liberate Sethe from the cruelty of *Beloved*. The following passage is an important landmark of black solidarity:

The singing women recognized Sethe at once and surprised themselves by their absence of fear when they saw what stood next to her. The devil - child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderblack and glistening, she stood on long straight legs,

²⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, op. cit., p. 85.

her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling.³⁰

As Sethe is being tormented and tortured by her returned daughter, the black women of Delaware cannot cross their hands. They come to her rescue for the second time because they have previously signed a petition to prevent her from being hung after her murder. *Beloved* forces readers to consider the justice of Sethe's act. Mae G. Henderson tackles the issue in this sense:

The novel {*Beloved*} forces readers to consider the justice of Sethe's act, and in doing so forces us to reconsider our own categories of judgment. The individual story of *Beloved* is also tied to the community's attitude to the members of that household. In addition to a narrative of maternal love, the novel represents the struggle for a beloved community.³¹

While some are blaming Sethe for wrongdoing, others try to understand her act because the fact of killing her daughter is not done deliberately. For example, according to some critics, even Morrison herself does not blame Sethe. Instead, she puts her reproaches on the institution of slavery as is written by Martha Bayles in this paragraph:

The system, and not the slave, stand unjustly condemned for a deed that would possess another meaning if committed in freedom... In Morrison's mind there seems to be only one crime, that of slavery itself, and no person who lives under it has to answer for anything. So intent is she on showing the inhumanity of the master, she dehumanizes the slave. From the subtle calibration of right and wrong which distinguishes the old master and John tales we arrive at the collapse of all moral distinctions³² (1988, 30 - 40).

In Bayles's opinion, Sethe is not guilty and responsible for her murder. She blames the institution of slavery which, in reality, is at the origin of all moral collapse in the black families. This assassination is used by the author just to emphasize the cruelties of slavery which, according to Doreski, "persists in the lynch laws, race murders and the convict lease system"³³ and call all human beings to get inspired by the women of Delaware when the life of one member of the community is in danger.

2. Conclusion

In *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave* and *Beloved* the quest of profit is the source of the instrumentalization of justice which brings many conflicts and a lot of tension among races. In both novels, there is a very rude battle opposing White masters to black slaves fighting or running away for their freedom. Because of the

³⁰ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, op. cit., p. 261.

³¹ Mae G. Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text," In *Comparative American Identities*. Ed. Hortense J. Spillers. New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 204.

³² Martha Bayles, "Special Effects, Special Pleadingr. The new criterion. Vol. 6, Jan 1988, pp. 30-40.

³³ C. K. Doreski, *Writing America Black Race: Rhetoric in the Public Sphere in Cambridge studies In. American literature and culture, Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 12.*

dehumanizing effects of slavery which deprive Negroes of any right of liberty, possession, education or the acquisition of knowledge, love which remains a dangerous feeling for them, the number of murders has increased and has especially affected the black family.

As illustrated in *Beloved*, the assassination of a child could not be avoided by the mother. Sethe kills her daughter Beloved just to avoid her going back to slavery because she does not want her nor any of her children suffer from the tortures and humiliations of slavery. As she is deeply convinced that there is no justice in the world, she believes that the afterlife is better than living in bondage with rude masters like Schoolteacher who pitilessly disperse the Sweet home men by his cruelties.

The absence of justice is also expressed by Douglass who, in *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American slave*, shows how the slaves are physically and morally tortured and humiliated because of the quest for profit. Not only are they whipped severely by masters, but there is also a law which prevents them from learning how to read and write. They are excluded from any possibilities of getting or acquiring knowledge. They are kept into ignorance and slaves like Douglass wage very rude struggles to get rid of this catastrophic situation which is slavery.

By writing about slavery, both Douglass and Morrison aim to moralize human relationships. Going from the numerous tensions existing between Whites and Blacks in America, they highlight universal values such as love, solidarity, dignity which are common to all human beings.

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