

ABSTRACT

Home is Where the Haunt Is: History, Haunting, and the Contemporary African-American Community in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Brett J. Hager

Director: Dr. Mona M. Choucair, Ph.D.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, hailed as one of the most important books of the twentieth century, challenges the contemporary reader to come to terms with the reality of slavery through the lens of a neo-slave narrative. Set around Cincinnati, Ohio, *Beloved* tells the story of ex-slave Sethe, who lives at the house 124 with her young daughter Denver. When a mysterious young woman named Beloved arrives to the house, Sethe is forced to confront not only her own troubled past as a former slave, but also the dark history of the people forcibly brought to the American landscape to work. This thesis analyzes the role of the literal and figurative ghosts accompanied by that history in the personal life of the protagonist as well as the public life of the African-American community around her. Through situating her text in the time of slavery, Morrison looks backward while addressing her present-day audiences, transcending temporal boundaries and propelling her work into the twentieth century. By making relevant to present-day readers the harsh reality of slavery, the author memorializes those whose lives were lost to enslavement and culturally unites those left behind.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Mona Choucair, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Andrew Wisely, Director

Date: _____

HOME IS WHERE THE HAUNT IS: HISTORY, HAUNTING, AND THE
CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN *BELOVED*

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Brett J. Hager

Waco, Texas

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad – Thank you for everything

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Purpose of Study

Introduction

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* has been hailed as one of the most beautifully styled and hauntingly moving literary works of the twentieth century. Beloved indeed by several readers, the novel seeks to address the issue of the effects of the historical reality of African-American enslavement on the physical and psychological lives of all those who, in some form or fashion, have experienced the abominations of such a practice. The incredibly real nature of these practices is made no clearer in the novel than through the protagonist Sethe's decision to kill her infant daughter in order to save her from the atrocities which await her in their contemporary American social realm. This pivotal decision, which will haunt Sethe quite literally, raises several questions throughout the novel, especially considering the fact that the majority of the action is told after the Emancipation of the slaves. Sethe wishes to move past the horrors she has witnessed, yet the arrival of a strange young woman which calls to mind her murdered infant will not let her progress forward. The young woman, Beloved, then proceeds to drain Sethe's very life force; Sethe willingly lets her physical and psychological deterioration occur because "Beloved [is] more important, [means] more to her than her own life" (Morrison, *Beloved* 242). It is not until the community as a whole steps in to exorcise the ghost that Sethe and her living daughter, Denver, may actually resume their lives in peace and begin to cultivate an existence worth living. The exorcism is not only necessary for Sethe and Denver's health and safety, it is also a brilliant moment of catharsis for the black

community of Cincinnati, which propels the message of the narrative from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century, as Morrison argues that her people's history is not something to be completely lost from the minds of those who experienced the horrors of enslavement.

Purpose of Study

Much of the criticism surrounding Morrison's crowning achievement examines the role of history in society and how it can be both a positive and negative idea in the minds of the beholders. As I attempt to contribute to this ongoing conversation, my study of Morrison's novel will be primarily twofold. First, I will analyze Morrison's view of historiography and the haunting effect of the individual interpretation of history through the novel itself as well as interviews with Morrison. I will also briefly compare Morrison's own style as evidenced through the novel with the style of another prominent twentieth century American writer, William Faulkner, whose views of history are not too unlike Morrison's. Second, I will detail the role of the larger black community in the novel, relating Sethe's black neighbors in the nineteenth century to Morrison's own of the twentieth century, showing that the past can be difficult, but it should not be forgotten, as it leads ever so slowly, moment by moment, to the present day. Through this examination of the novel, I hope to prove that Morrison's primary attempt in the writing of the work is to demonstrate the paradoxical fleetingness and permanence of history, a force which is at once absent as though it never existed as well as branded into the very nature of those who have experienced it. These ideas are briefly elaborated upon in the following paragraphs.

Perhaps one of the ways in which one may better understand Morrison's views towards these questions and the message of the novel as a whole is through her style, itself reminiscent of the stream-of-consciousness styles developed by British authors James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and later heightened by American author William Faulkner. An avid reader of Woolf and Faulkner herself, Morrison's Master's thesis examined the writings of these two authors. In her thesis, Morrison focuses a good deal on Faulkner more so than Woolf, making it "likely that her texts owe something to" this earlier twentieth-century American novelist (Vendrame 679). Indeed, the stream-of-consciousness style in several of the key scenes and passages throughout Morrison's texts not only echoes the same writing style which was heightened by Faulkner, but also indicates a sort of adoption of some of Faulkner's own philosophies toward history and especially historiography, the mapping of history.

Through the arrival of Beloved's ghost to Sethe and Denver's home, 124 Bluestone Road, Morrison probes deeply into the psychological implications of slavery as well as history: how does one move forward with one's life after one's people has been so unimaginably exploited for decades? Should people try to forget the horrors perpetrated by humanity, such as slavery, even those like Sethe, who feels the cruelty and injustice of the act firsthand? And finally, what role does our culture's understanding and perception of history play in the interpretation and analysis of the events which have transpired? This study will attempt to answer these questions, with particular emphasis on the role of history and haunting in the novel.

Finally, what is the role of the larger community in the life of the individual? The black community of Cincinnati rallies around Sethe at the novel's end in order to exorcise

the ghost from 124, cathartically confronting the issues of their own past enslavement which surround the ghost's origins in the process. Morrison suggests that there is no alternative way through which Sethe might be saved from the new prison to which Beloved's presence has confined her. Sethe's living daughter, Denver, does not have the power by herself to save her mother, and therefore leaves 124 for one of the first times in the novel's course in order to seek help from the outside black community. Indeed, Denver realizes that "she would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave [Beloved and Sethe] behind and go ask somebody for help. Who would it be?" (*Beloved* 243). The answer to this final question of Denver's thoughts is the black community of Cincinnati in the surrounding areas from 124. Through the exorcism, the community itself is allowed to confront head-on the horrors of its people's past in order to save its future. Morrison's depiction of a community rallying together in order to save Sethe from almost certain death is reflective of the black rallying to strip history of its dark power over the people, a group of which Morrison's own contemporary black readers are also a part. Morrison's nineteenth century black community faces the same problem as the twentieth and twenty-first century readers of the novel, allowing Morrison to make her case that the African-American race must perform a similar figurative exorcism so that the history of slavery does not permanently and ultimately handicap this people.

Through this study, I hope to show not only Toni Morrison's own literary and philosophical views of history, but also show that that history, particularly as it relates to the black community, has an undeniable mark on the development of later generations. Regardless of this fact, however, I will also attempt to show that Morrison's ideal view of

the role of history in the life in the individual is one in which the past does not haunt or plague the community like *Beloved* haunts Sethe, yet still is not forgotten altogether. The strangely hopeful ending of the novel, in which Beloved's "footprints come and go, come and go," acknowledges the ever-present reality of the past, yet is not present in an oppressive or overbearing sense (275). Although the black community in the novel chooses to forget about Beloved and what she stood for, Morrison does not endorse this sort of view for real-life African-Americans. Whereas the novel's community believes "remembering seem[s] unwise," Morrison believes just the opposite, as the final chapter makes clear the ever-lasting impact of Beloved and enslavement simply by ending the work with the word "Beloved" (274-75). History is as elusive and as haunting as a ghost in Morrison's perspective, allowing her to demonstrate the importance of the interplay of history and community in the life of the individual.

Literature Review

The primary text for this argument is, of course, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. There are, however, several other collections of Morrison's writings which helped to shape the trajectory of my arguments. These include some speeches and interviews with Morrison by different critics and news organizations. Several of these come from *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie, as well other resources such as the public domain, where one may find several of Morrison's writings like her acceptance speech for the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature. While the novel proper is the primary focus of this study, these other writings of Morrison's provide valuable insight into the development of the author's narrative throughout the writing process.

Several works critiquing and analyzing William Faulkner's novels, especially *Absalom, Absalom!*, are also considered throughout the study. Carl E. Rollyson, Jr.'s *Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner* was invaluable in helping to illuminate the various ways in which Faulkner's works view history and what roughly may be Faulkner's own ideas of history and historiography. Rollyson argues that Faulkner's "novels are treated as representatives of what in the broadest sense may be called historical process," which he then goes on to develop as the manner in which time and man move constantly forward in tandem, yet there are certain "fundamental repetitions and ironies of history [which] tie together all periods of time," showing that in Faulkner's mind, the past indeed never dies (5). Rollyson's study also offers commentary on how Faulkner's characters in several of his novels "show how such reinterpretations [of past events] stem not only from the characters' steadily increasing awareness and knowledge of past events, but also from their" growing cognizance that the past is a vital aspect in individual development, indicating that the characters see themselves not only as separate unique individuals in the human world, but also "as the products and extensions of those past events" which have either directly or indirectly had an impact in their existences (17). This last idea is one which I hope to expand to include *Beloved*, showcasing the influence of Faulkner's ideas on Morrison as well as showing that Sethe, Denver, and the rest of the black community in the novel become extensions of the past which has psychologically and physically plagued their people.

Other essays which helped in understanding Faulkner's use of the past, particularly with regards to motion and movement, come from the *Greenhaven Press Literary Companion to American Authors: Readings on William Faulkner*. This

anthology of essays provided a wealth of information in helping to illuminate the ever-moving nature of history in Faulkner's mind. One of these essays, Richard P. Adams's "Faulkner's Use of Motion as Metaphor," proposes that Faulkner plays with the notion of history in his novels in such a way that "prevents our feeling time as a thin, straight string with events marked off at measured intervals; instead, we feel it as a heavy cluster, knot, or tangle, with all the ends lost in the middle" (57). In other words, whereas our conventional way of thinking about time lines up events one after another in a linear fashion, Faulkner views human experience and perception as jumbled, suggesting that events which have happened in the past may repeat themselves or hold a considerable amount of weight in determining the outcome of situations of the present. This theory may very well be applied to Morrison's *Beloved* as well, as Sethe's action of killing her baby girl as well as her being forced into slavery are both past actions which heavily influence the course of present repercussions in the novel. Sethe's movement through time is halted in a sense by the presence of the ghost, itself a figure free of temporal and historical restraints.

Besides criticisms on Faulkner, most other secondary sources focus on Morrison's work itself. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, edited by Marc C. Conner, offers various insights into the aesthetic principles and natures of Morrison's novels. Conner even begins the introduction with three quotes from African-American writers, the last of which is Morrison herself. Conner quotes a frustrated Morrison who contends that "the discussion of black literature in critical terms is unfailingly sociology and almost never art criticism" (ix). Conner, along with the other contributors to this collection, understands that a people's history is not based on merely sociology—a

people's culture is comprised of aesthetic and historical aspects as well as a sociological one. Morrison's quote, which comes about three years before the publication of *Beloved*, offers further insight into the role of community in the novel, showing that a community's collective and individual identities are not based solely off of sociological statistics and analysis; indeed, there are other important aspects, such as a people's culture, part of which is made up of that people's history, which compose the entire fabric of identity.

One of the essays from this collection, Yvonne Atkinson's "Language that Bears Witness: the Black Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison," makes clear that one of the most important forms of personal identity, whether from a sociological, aesthetic, or historical viewpoint, is the use of language itself. In this essay, Atkinson contests claims of several prominent Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, that the captive "Africans brought to America . . . had no art, because they lacked the necessary emotions needed to produce artistry" (12). Atkinson points out that the actual tools necessary for creating long-lasting works of art were denied Africans upon arrival into the states, as slavery and prejudice prevented them from expressing the many emotions that they indeed possessed. One form of art which could never be denied the slaves, however, was oral tradition; these included stories and legends from the old world, as well as personal tales and accounts of horror and survival in the new. Atkinson argues, and I agree, that Morrison is very aware of the power of the spoken word and words in general, thereby imbuing upon her characters an incredible power which can never be taken away by the white American society. With regards to *Beloved* specifically, Atkinson looks to Sethe's and Baby Suggs's own stories throughout the work, as well as songs experienced or sung

by other characters. Atkinson indicates that these stories and songs “are a communal discourse about life,” as well as one of the foundations of oral tradition in society (26). For Atkinson, the various uses of Black English in Morrison’s works celebrates the aesthetic beauty of language and culture, showing the author’s attempt to remove the African-American novel from existing only in the sociological realm to also existing within the cultural, aesthetic, and historical realms.

Another helpful essay from this collection is Susan Corey’s “Toward the Limits of Mystery: the Grotesque in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” This essay explores the implementation of the grotesque in the novel as a means of “representing the complex social world of slavery and exposing the moral failure of the society which sustained and defended that institution . . . [while opening] doors for change and renewal to those who suffer the effects of slavery” (32). Corey explores several instances throughout the novel which portray elements of the grotesque and the uncanny in order to confuse, shock, and even offend the reader. Some of the instances referred to by Corey include the tree-shaped scar inflicted upon Sethe by the cruel Schoolteacher and the disturbing scene in which Sethe is robbed of her breast-milk in a depraved attempt to show the bestial nature of Africans. Corey concludes that the presence of the grotesque in the novel is an aesthetic accomplishment which makes the reader wish to revisit and rethink the various mysterious facets and dimensions of the work. The grotesque associated with the past becomes an important force throughout Morrison’s novel, as it reinforces the never-ending brutality of the cruel actions those like Sethe have experienced in their own personal histories.

Toni Morrison’s Beloved by Justine Tally analyzes the various origins of the

novel from ancient Greece and Africa, as well as the politicization of memory and memory's role in "serving the present and the future as much as honoring the past" (Tally 29). Tally realizes that one of Morrison's primary objectives in the writing and publication of *Beloved* was to reunify the black community, stating that "the human mind will retain vestiges of the past in subtle and seemingly insignificant or unobtrusive ways" (49). One of Morrison's purposes, then, is to tap into these vestiges through the placement of the narrative in a historical frame, thus bringing them forward into the contemporary age for current African-Americans while honoring those whose lives were lost to the institution of slavery.

Renowned literary scholar Harold Bloom's *Modern Critical Views: Toni Morrison* also offers several essays examining the role of history, haunting and community in *Beloved*. The celebrated contemporary author Margaret Atwood contributes a brief essay, titled "Haunted by their Nightmares," to the collection, in which she praises the force of Morrison's mastery in the novel as well as depicts slavery "as one of the most viciously antifamily institutions human beings have ever devised" (Bloom 145). Atwood acknowledges Morrison's successful attempt to reinvigorate the feeling of community and family which African-American people, even some in the twentieth century, have lost due to the horrors of slavery. Atwood also discusses briefly the same presence of the grotesque which Susan Corey addresses in her aforementioned essay.

Another essay in Bloom's collection comes from Marilyn Sanders Mobley. This addition, titled "A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," examines "the complex relationship between history and memory by shifting from lived experience . . . to remembered experience as represented in the

novel” (190). The “lived experience” referred to here comes from Morrison’s own work on a text known as *The Black Book*, which contains several artistic artifacts which celebrate “the black cultural production that grew out of and in spite of” the institution of slavery (189). One of the critical aspects regarding the novel which Mobley points out is the basis for the work: the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who killed her child in 1855 because she did not want her baby to grow up only to suffer in a cruel and merciless world. Though this anecdote is the original basis of the story, Morrison uses Garner’s and other slaves’ histories merely as a springboard rather than a direct inspiration. Instead of retelling Margaret Garner’s story, Morrison creates a “text [which] illustrates the call and response pattern of the African-American oral tradition” (193). Mobley also examines the importance of the ideas behind *rememory*, the novel’s vernacular term for both the noun and verb forms of remembering, as well as *disremembering*, the vernacular term for forgetting. Mobley argues that these vernacular terms “suggest the slaves’ own preoccupation with mnemonic processes,” actively forcing themselves either to remember some element of the past, or preoccupying themselves with some sort of task in order to force themselves to forget (195).

One final anthology which helped tremendously throughout the process of this study was Solomon and Marla Iyasere’s *Critical Insights: Toni Morrison*. In particular, Amy M. Green’s “Crying, Dancing, Laughing: The Breaking and Reunification of Community in *Beloved*,” provided insight into the interactions of the larger African-American community in the novel. The essay chronicles the story from Sethe’s ostracism from the black community due to the presence of the baby’s ghost all the way to the community’s role in the exorcism in the final section of the novel. Green argues that

Denver's leaving 124 in order to seek help from the larger community "marks [her] finally claiming the title of woman," thus acting as a mediator through whom "the community as a whole [can now begin] the slow, laborious movement toward reconciliation" (125). This reconciliation does not only refer to the community's reconciling of Sethe for bringing upon herself the wrath of her angry dead baby, but also to the reconciliatory movement of the black community to accepting the past of slavery in order to move forward as a society.

Conclusion

This study, then, will ultimately show the importance of history and the presence of the past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Examining connections between Morrison's and William Faulkner's writing styles and thematic elements will offer insight into the philosophical and literary roles of history, particularly with respect to its role in the lives of contemporary African-Americans. The gothic element of the ghostly presence in the novel will further support this view of history as not separate from the past, but inextricably bound to the present as time moves unceasingly forward. Finally, by situating her novel in the context of nineteenth-century black Cincinnati, Morrison paradoxically contains the neo-slave narrative within that temporal frame while also moving the story forward into the contemporary era in order to suggest ways in which the black community all over America may learn to cope with and accept the past of slavery. Morrison's novel not only weaves a beautiful story about a mother's haunted past and her two daughters, it also masterfully suggests the undeniable influence of history in the role of individual and community progress and development.

CHAPTER TWO

History, Haunting, and Cultural Consciousness in *Beloved*

Toni Morrison places much weight on the significance of history and the influence which the interpretation of historical events plays on the cultural consciousness of its relevant groups. Marilyn Sanders Mobley details Morrison's 1974 work on *The Black Book*, a "collection of memorabilia [which] represents 300 years of black history, and not only records the material conditions of black life from slavery to freedom, but also" demonstrates the consequences such accounts and activities have had on the cultural psyche of African-Americans (189). While working on this book, Morrison discovered the story of Margaret Garner, which itself would provide the foundation for *Beloved*. It is interesting to note that while Garner's story inspires Morrison's novel, the author does not research further into the matter, using only the detail of a desperate slave mother granting salvation to her daughter through slaughtering the infant as her starting point. Morrison adheres to her philosophy of the impact of history on cultural consciousness through not delving into the actual history of the Garner incident, but rather using the story's impact that the story has had on her in order to craft her tale. The ghost of Garner's child does not come back to haunt the mother literally as Sethe's does in Morrison's novel, yet the history of such an action happening as a direct result of the abomination of slavery no doubt haunted Garner to her dying day, much as it haunts Morrison and the American cultural memory as well.

In Morrison's work, history does not present itself in the normal chronological way in which we generally think of it in the extra-literary world; rather, it "meanders

through time, sometimes circling back, other times moving vertically, spirally out of time and down into space” (Mobley 192). The effects of these meanderings through time and space show that the past, though it no longer exists in the present moment, exists and reoccurs in the minds of the individuals which identify with a particular culture and that culture’s memories. This sort of historiographical fragmentation is no more obvious than in the famous stream-of-consciousness antepenultimate chapter of Part Two, where an unknown voice (perhaps Sethe’s itself,) experiences past and present in the same moment. In some sentences, Sethe’s past action of killing her child becomes the focal point, as she sees “[t]he breathing is gone; only the teeth are left” (Morrison, *Beloved* 216). On the same page, in the next block of sentences, the voices state the following mysterious and chilling words:

Beloved
You are my sister
You are my daughter
You are my face; you are me
I have found you again; you have come back to me
You are my Beloved
You are mine (216)

The dearth of periods at the ends of the thoughts throughout the entirety of this section emphasizes the lack of closure and finality which the speaker experiences as a result of reliving the past in the present moment. The disorientation causes Sethe to feel paradoxically related to Beloved in a maternal way as well as in a sisterly way. The only punctuation in this thought block is two semi-colons, reflecting the interconnectedness of the ideas separated by the punctuation, as the voice feels at once that Beloved is her face as well as her essence, and that she is not completely sure of whether she has rediscovered Beloved or if the child has come back to her of her own volition. The

reliving of the past and the events which have plagued the protagonist for years makes itself clear in the fragmented presentation of thought and the lack of punctuation which calls to mind the lack of closure and security the protagonist feels toward the situation. The fragmentation itself could be a result of Morrison's study of another twentieth-century American writer: William Faulkner.

When asked about her relation to Faulkner as a writer, Morrison herself has responded that she is "not *like* Faulkner. I am not *like* in that sense. I do not have objections to being compared to such extraordinarily gifted and facile writers, but it does leave me sort of hanging there when I know that my effort is to be *like* something . . ." (McKay 152). She objects to the notion of being compared to others in the sense of being *like* another writer of the past, particularly a white male author, when she herself is an African-American female author. Despite her objections, however, one can be influenced by another without being a copy of that other. Indeed, it is entirely possible, and perhaps even unavoidable, that one can be subconsciously influenced by another author, adopting and adapting particular stylistic techniques of a master of the past in one's own work. Morrison herself wrote her Master's thesis in 1955 on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, two twentieth-century authors who are thought to be masters of the stream-of-consciousness style in psychological narrative. It seems to me unlikely that she could spend so much time working on these two authors and not be influenced on some level by their works and philosophies. As such, to understand and appreciate fully the stylistic impact of *Beloved* and some of the basis of its historiographical philosophy, it proves essential to understand some of Faulkner's own thoughts on historiography.

As already stated, Morrison uses the story of Margaret Garner as the springboard

of her work, yet she does not implement the actual facts of the situation into her novel. For Morrison and Faulkner, the following statement on creative genius in connection with historical truth seems to be one of the many underlying narratological philosophies in their works:

“imagination . . . is primary; facts, sources, evidence of the sources of [their] creations are secondary. . . . In other words, actuality, documented history, real living figures (even if disguised), are all part of what has already been said, already been experienced. Fiction, on the other hand, is what is genuinely new, independent, and original” (Rollyson 11).

For this reason, Morrison does not rewrite Margaret Garner’s story. It already happened; it is part of human history. It influences *Beloved* but it is not *like* that work. Just as William Faulkner uses the history of the South as a springboard for his seminal work *Absalom, Absalom!*, Morrison uses Garner’s history in a similar way. The specific details of the situation do not matter to the writers because they have already taken place in the real world. It is not their story as fiction writers to tell. However, Faulkner, being a Southern writer, and Morrison, being an African-American author, both use their people’s histories to craft a story which has merit in the real world, even though its details did not occur outside of the text itself.

Morrison does not only question the boundaries of our notion of history. A closely related notion which the author also distorts is that of time. Perhaps another inspiration drawn from Faulkner, Morrison plays with the audience’s idea that “narrative [is] more or less chronological” (Adams 56). Instead of presenting the events of the novel in a linear, more normal fashion, Morrison again seems to adhere to the same temporal philosophy as Faulkner, who in his own words, stated “there is no such thing as *was*—only *is*. If *was* existed there would be no grief or sorrow” (qtd. in Millgate 37).

This statement can certainly be applied to *Beloved*, as several of the principal characters are trapped in a circular suffering in which they experience the same trauma or event over and over again, seemingly infinitely. Naturally, Beloved expresses this idea most clearly, as she has been liberated from the bonds of temporal existence through her death. The ghost voice states that “All of it is now it is always now” (Morrison, *Beloved* 210). At once, she remembers and experiences “crouching and watching others who are crouching too,” perhaps eternally experiencing the crouching sensation, outside of the normal parameters of time.

It is in this particular chapter that Morrison begins to do something truly spectacular, as Morrison herself has described that the character of Beloved in her novel is not only the literal ghostly incarnation of Sethe’s infant daughter, but she also represents a certain “kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from the true, factual slave ship” (Darling 247). Morrison realizes that the historical slaves who came across the Atlantic through the Middle Passage experienced a kind of existence which is unimaginable to contemporary civilized human beings; Beloved, as Morrison points out, comes to represent those slaves of the Middle Passage through the very fact that “the language of both experiences—death and the Middle Passage—is the same . . . the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist” (247). Language itself, then, becomes one of the connectors between past and present, an idea enhanced through Morrison’s own endeavor in writing the novel *Beloved*. While she lies there with a dead man on her face, Beloved states that “All of it is now” (*Beloved* 210). She muses on the unity of the temporal thread which spans generations to the dawn of civilization, an idea not at all unlike those which

Faulkner posited about the unity of time in his novels. In this way, the novel combines the past and present of the literary story while also joining that past and present to the future, which extends to the present-day world outside of the text in which Morrison and her readers live. Critics place *Beloved* in the category of a neo-slave narrative, which will be defined as a work written in the post-Civil Rights era, in which an author did not live in slave times, yet crafts a work based on slavery. History, then, does not exist as an idea separate from the temporal confines of the present; rather, history becomes bound together with the present through the medium of linguistic symbols and representations which hold specific meaning for a common audience.

The actual details of history, such as real-world dates, times, and places, thus become less important in Morrison's writing because of her commitment to a cultural, shared heritage as opposed to an individual, isolated experience. Sethe's story is not only Sethe's, as "Morrison sees her role as a writer as bearing witness to 'the interior life of people who didn't write [their history] (which doesn't mean that they didn't have it)" (Bell 167—qte from Samuels and Hudson-Weems 97). Morrison concerns her writing with the fuller picture of *the* African-American existence instead of with a more intimate depiction of *an* African-American's existence. The employment of a neo-slave narrative is extremely effective in this regard, calling to the mind of the reader the classic American slave narratives, such as those of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, while simultaneously possessing the capability of detaching from that tradition and existing within a more contemporary, postmodern tradition, an idea which further represents the coexistence of history and the present in a culture's shared experience. Morrison only needs to place her story within a well-known time period, such as the years following the

Civil War and the Emancipation of the slaves, in order to situate Sethe in a context which makes it clear to her audience that this is a story that, indeed, deals directly with slavery, yet focuses more so on the lasting effects of slavery, just as the African experience in the New World is no longer directly enslaved or involved with slave trade, yet is still greatly influenced and affected by the truth of slavery's existence—even almost 150 years after the real-life slaves received their legal freedom.

One of the most obvious and important ways in which Morrison universalizes the African-American experience in *Beloved* is through the novel's primary source of conflict: the ghost of Beloved herself. The gothic employment of the ghost has been used throughout the canon of American literature in order to represent past events which continue to actually or symbolically plague the mind, body, and soul of the individual, and by extension, of the larger group. One of the most well-known examples in American literature comes from the 19th-century author Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," in which the narrator recounts the horrifying return of Lady Madeline Usher's ghostly presence and her advance upon her brother Roderick, bringing about the fall of the house as well as the physical and spiritual existences of the two, beginning with Roderick's agonized "syllables, [spoken] as if in the effort he were giving up his soul" (Nagel 135). As Madeline charges Roderick to bring about the siblings' final destruction, the narrator recounts the terrifying encounter, saying Madeline let out "a low moaning cry, [then] fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her horrible and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had dreaded" (135). This classic literary encounter of living and dead presents a great template for the use of specters and ghosts in future stories and books, including

Morrison's *Beloved*.

Whereas Poe's Madeline haunts a particular individual in "The Fall of the House of Usher," the ghostly presence of Beloved literally affects the lives of an entire group while symbolically touching the lives of generations of African-Americans throughout the fabric of American history. For Sethe, Beloved represents the desperate feeling of needing to end her infant daughter's life in order to avoid a more gruesome fate at the appropriately and ironically named Sweet Home plantation; for the African-American community at large, both within and outside of the text, Beloved represents the pain and suffering of generations of slaves and their descendants who must process and ultimately accept a horrible past which they cannot change. Even some of Morrison's characters within the text have difficulty accepting such an awful history, including Sethe's own sons, Howard and Buglar. The truth of the past is so unpleasant that it causes Sethe's sons to abandon her and 124 "as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard)" (Morrison, *Beloved* 3). This, of course, proves to be the last time the audience hears anything from either of the sons, signifying their total desertion of family and home in a futile attempt to disown the past it represents.

For all of the horror that Beloved represents, however, she is "primarily Sethe's creation," a symbolic figure to which Sethe clings in order not to forget the life of the baby girl that she had to kill for her own good (Marks 70). As such, Beloved's name "is first a word that names Sethe's desire for wholeness with a fragment from the preacher's speech at her baby's funeral." Herself a rejected woman by the African-American community, Sethe wishes to be loved as well—having lost the respect and goodwill of

her peers, Sethe seeks solace in the living memory of the infant daughter she lost, perhaps hoping that she may find reconciliation not only with her dead child, but the rest of those like her as well. Sethe thus views *Beloved* as a means of connecting with both the worlds of the spirit and flesh through the interactions with her baby's ghost. Morrison, however, seems to view *Beloved* as the ghost of the collective African-American experience from slave times and beyond.

It seems to have been easy for Morrison to choose a ghost story in order to relay this idea of *Beloved* as history; in a 1987 interview with *Boston Globe* reporter Gail Caldwell, Morrison discusses her inspiration for the ghost's presence in the novel, stating that she had always been interested in ghost stories which her parents had told her. As such, when *Beloved* appears for the first time in her "flesh-and-blood manifestation . . . no lines on her palms and no history to speak of—her presence seems as ordinary as an afternoon visit from the local preacher" (Caldwell 242). The fact that *Beloved* has "no history to speak of" is indicative of the idea that *Beloved* *is* history itself—*Beloved* comes to represent a memorialization of the past, present, and future African-American culture. When she accepted the Frederic G. Melcher Book Award in 1988, Morrison stated the following regarding the idea that the book serves as a memorial for all Africans ever to make a home, enslaved or not, in America:

There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit . . . And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to. But I didn't know that before or while I wrote it. I can see now what I was doing on the last page. I was finishing the story, transfiguring and disseminating the haunting with which the book begins. Yes, I was doing that; but I was also doing something more. I think I was pleading for that wall or that bench or that tower or that tree when I wrote the final words (Morrison, Frederic G. Melcher Speech).

Those final words, the last of which is the title itself, along with Morrison's beautifully subdued dedication in the beginning, "Sixty Million and More," signifies that this book is written for African-Americans to remember their ancestors, who as a whole comprise an important story in American history, yet are by-and-large forgotten by American society. Beloved, then, is not simply the name of the "crawling-already? baby," but the name of the entire population of slaves that were brought against their will to the United States (*Beloved* 93). The hyphenated singularity of the phrase "crawling-already?" reflects the utterly short life of the baby, as well as the short human existences of the slaves brought over to America. African slaves were human beings, yet their notion of themselves as human beings did not last long, as they were dehumanized and became unspecific, treated merely as cogs in the American economic machine. This same stripping of individual specificity is mirrored several times throughout the novel through Morrison's language and treatment of otherwise harmless words, such as *thing*.

At various points of the novel, Morrison uses the word "thing" to signify torturous thoughts which plague the minds of the character. The inherent lack of specificity in the word thing mirrors the lack of a specific purpose which the slaves feel in their lives. In one scene, Baby Suggs reflects upon an odor she smells, calling it "This dark and coming thing" (Morrison 139). The odor and the dark thing she associates with it causes her to think of her seven children that she has lost to the slave trade, an event which speaks to the circular nature of historic personal events. Even the prospect of the death of the only child that "they let her keep" does not seem painful or evil enough to satisfy the dread she feels with this odor. The thing is dark enough, in fact, to make her think that it is no good "looking too hard at that youngest one." Even the connotation associated with "that"

dehumanizes the youngest child, showing the mental disconnect Baby Suggs feels with her own children. She cannot let herself get attached to the one child she has left because she knows that to do so would be meaningless, ending eventually in tragedy. The dark and coming thing symbolizes the fear that haunts Baby Suggs, a fear which disallows her to enjoy life. She, like other slaves, has mentally detached herself from the world around her because she realizes that she has no purpose in it other than to be abused in the fields. This is especially poignant, given her thoughts on Mr. Garner (whose name bizarrely echoes Margaret Garner's own), her former master, who "acted like the world was a toy he was supposed to have fun with" (139). The use of the word toy echoes the lack of specificity of the word thing, making it seem as though she too is only some *thing* that has no value or purpose.

Another instance where Morrison uses the word thing to carry powerfully haunting images of the misuse endured by the slaves comes from the aforementioned slave ship scene, an especially memorable chapter of the book, in which Beloved speaks to the audience about "a hot thing" (210). As stated earlier, this chapter expertly integrates history and haunting as Beloved appears to be on a slave ship carrying more physical cargo to the United States for work. While on board, Beloved constantly refers to "a hot thing." Again, this thing is unspecified, adding to the trouble and feeling of haunting that the African slaves feel on their voyage to the New World. The objective tone with which Beloved describes the horrific scene around her calls to mind an almost naturalistic worldview in which the individual has no inherent worth or dignity, an idea which indeed the slaves viewed their lives with. Combining Beloved's objectivity with the idea from Baby Suggs's use of the word that thing signifies something unspecific and

unhuman, the hot thing comes not only to signify the branding of the slaves with a hot poker, but the still-alive slaves on the ship, who live and thus produce physical heat, but who also do not have worth in the eyes of the rest of the world.

The third instance in which thing is used to signify something unspecific and thus something hauntingly powerful comes from the final chapter, when an unidentified voice (probably Sethe's,) speaks of "a loneliness that can be rocked" (274). The speaker's description of rocking this loneliness calls to mind a fetal position, with "arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's smooths and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind—wrapped tight like skin" (274). The fetal image conjured by this description is especially powerful given the nature of the ghost of a baby who was killed for its own good. The voice in this chapter uses the cryptic phrase "a dry and spreading thing" to emphasize the unity of time and the African-American feeling of loneliness, as the thing "makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place." Again non-specific, the dry and spreading thing could also mean the human body, just as the hot thing from *Beloved*'s reflections could. The lonely, dry body of the newly freed African-Americans now have to move on to other places in search for the worth and dignity that they would like to have and deserve as fellow human beings. The unity of time and the present effects of the past are evident in the paradoxical association of something intimate, such as one's own feet, come from a place behind or in front of the individual. Sethe realizes in this moment that her people's history haunts her, instilling in her a feeling of utter loneliness. The only way that this loneliness can be counteracted would be a retreat back to one's own fetal existence, when all evidence of skin color has not yet taken form. This sort of existence is "like skin," but it is not

actually skin, the identifying mark of individual worth in her time. Without this mark, Sethe could rock away her loneliness, yet perhaps her post-fetal, black existence will not allow such a comfort.

These three uses of the word thing to mean unspecified items throughout the text relates to the reader the feeling of helplessness and worthlessness that slaves such as Sethe feel in this world, as they are haunted by their past as well as their present. Thing comes to signify the slave itself, an object walking around in the world rather than a human being who may firmly establish him- or herself among his or her peers, whether or not they are of the same ethnicity.

Toni Morrison does not only wish to address the issues of Sethe's own personal haunting, however. Rather, I believe that Morrison writes her inspiring novel in order to address an issue more powerful than Sethe, and much powerful than even the author herself. In the end of the novel, Denver unites the larger black Cincinnati community in order to exorcise 124 once and for all from the malevolent spirit of Beloved and the hauntingly debilitating memory that she has come to represent. The unifying of this community and the way in which they deal with the aftermath of the horrific experience holds the key to how Morrison would like her contemporary African-Americans in the twentieth century to respond to the text, and how the extra-literary, real-world community processes and reconciles the reality of their ancestors' slavery in America.

CHAPTER THREE

Somewhere in the Middle: *Beloved* and the Larger African-American Existence

With these thoughts on history and the perception of the past in mind, what does Morrison herself wish for her primary audience, the contemporary African-American, to take away from the novel? In a 1989 conversation with Bill Moyers, Morrison recalls growing up black in America and her own experience that she has had with literature because of her ethnicity. She reflects especially on Mark Twain's classic nineteenth century novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, remembering how "we thought about how wonderful the innocence of this radical child was as a paradigm for the American coming of age. . . . The white American coming of age, because the story is about the construction of a white male" (Morrison, quoted in Moyers 263). Morrison takes issue with the fact that Huck's transformation furthers himself instead of empowering both himself as well as his friend Jim, whom Morrison also points out as always being "called a boy, never a man." Morrison laments the fact that "chances of getting a truly complex human black person in an American book in the nineteenth century [are] minimal" (Moyers 264). Reflecting upon this, Morrison writes *Beloved* to craft real flesh and blood characters such as Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, providing an example in the twentieth century of an American history, something which, by and large, the African-American community has for so long been considered other in rather than part of it. Morrison seeks to demonstrate to her fellow black Americans that they too have a history worth telling and a story as beautiful and haunting as *Beloved* itself.

Indeed, Morrison herself gives a voice to that long and tragic history in the novel,

unabashedly proclaiming the experience of African-Americans like herself, Margaret Garner, and millions more who have lived in a land that they have never felt is entirely their home. Like 124 Bluestone, America has been “spiteful” towards those who were captured and sent to perform the backbreaking labor that kept the economy functioning until the latter half of the nineteenth century (Morrison, *Beloved* 3). America has been “loud” in its historical stripping of basic human rights from a considerable portion of the population, sending a message to past, and even present, African-Americans that if you are not white, you do not have as much merit or freedom in the eyes of the law (169). America has been “quiet” and turned a blind eye toward the plights of black families struggling to stay alive in a country that has never accepted them as much as their white neighbors (239). Sethe’s home of 124 and the American cultural landscape share these similarities with one another, one haunted by the past actions of an individual, the other haunted by the past actions of a nation. How, then, does Morrison want African-Americans to respond to the text she has created so that their story might be told?

If, in the larger scope of the novel, we are to believe that *Beloved* represents America’s haunted past, and Sethe and the larger African-American community come then to represent American society itself, then it seems that Morrison argues for a middle-of-the-road sort of approach to the issue of slavery and our modern-day interpretations of the abuses which have occurred throughout the rest of the society’s existence. For example, Sethe allows herself to become consumed by *Beloved*, largely out of a feeling of guilt that she had to kill her own baby girl in order to save her, while the community as a whole chooses to forget the incident of the exorcism at 124 after banishing the ghostly *Beloved* from Sethe’s home. Morrison realizes that focusing too much on the past is

extremely dangerous to the psychological and even physical existence of a human being, but she also realizes that choosing to forget that past altogether is not helpful either. Perhaps somewhere between these two extremes lies the answer to how Morrison would like the contemporary African-American community to respond to her text. Morrison clearly portrays the differences in the responses of these two groups in the text.

As Sethe wastes away before the end of the novel, Beloved's presence grows, both literally and figuratively. Sethe begins to apologize to Beloved for whatever she complains about, wishing that she could trade her own life so that Beloved may take back her own. Morrison clearly demonstrates here the negative physical, psychological, and spiritual effects which linger from the past. Even Sethe's own name indicates the turmoil and distress she experiences throughout the entirety of the novel based off of her past actions. Sethe's name calls to mind two ancient stories, one from the Bible, and one from ancient Egyptian mythology. It is particularly interesting that both of these ancient mythological texts deal with two brothers, in which one kills the other in a jealous rage.

As for the biblical reference, Genesis Chapter 4 tells the story of Cain and Abel. A well-known story to many Christians (and by extension, many Americans), this is the tale of two sons of Adam and Eve. Upon making a sacrifice to the Lord, God takes favor upon Abel's offering, a gesture which enrages Cain to the point of plotting to kill his brother. After learning of Abel's death, Adam and Eve have another son named Seth; Eve makes the comment at Seth's birth that " 'God has granted me more offspring in place of Abel . . . because Cain slew him' " (Genesis 4:25). Not much information is given about Seth, especially when one accounts for the fact that he in the next chapter at the age of 912 years. Seth's line eventually leads to the birth of Noah, the famed builder of the

ark in the Old Testament.

After the epic Flood which destroyed almost every living creature on the planet, it is not too long before sin and destruction once again find a home in the human heart. Even in Genesis 9, the very same chapter in which God makes the covenant with Noah and his descendants, Ham walks into his inebriated father's tent and sees "his father's nakedness" (Genesis 9: 22). Upon awakening and learning what Ham has done, Noah is enraged and places a curse on Ham's next-of-kin, Canaan. He could not curse Ham himself because of the fact that he had already bestowed a blessing upon him: a curse could be revoked for a blessing in biblical times, but the reverse is not true. Once a blessing had been bestowed on an individual, it was considered permanent and could not be undone. Biblical scholars have speculated that the meaning of *seeing* Noah's nakedness could mean any of four different things (Bergsma and Hahn). The first is voyeurism—the act of walking in and seeing his father's nakedness was enough to merit the curse upon Canaan; next is castration—there has been speculation throughout biblical scholarship that *seeing* his father's nakedness implies that Ham castrated his father in his sleep. The final two both involve parental incest—one theory stating that Ham raped his sleeping father, while the other stating that Ham raped his mother while his father lay sleeping. Regardless of the events that actually transpired which caused Noah to feel so violated as to merit cursing his grandson, the argument that Canaan was cursed and then became the father of all of Africa was used to validate the practice of enslaving Africans up until the time of the Emancipation. Several people claimed that enslavement of the Africans was nothing more than just punishment for the curse of Canaan stemming back to the night when his father Ham saw his father's nakedness. The theme of the child

suffering for the past actions of the parent continues here, lengthening the thread of the sins of the father (or mother) which dates all the way to biblical days up until the present era.

The historical mark of Cain is even echoed in the pages of the novel itself. In a conversation that Sethe and Denver have regarding Sethe's mother, Sethe tells her daughter about a defining mark that her own mother had. Morrison even uses the language of "Mark the mark on me too," obviously deliberately to echo the language which has been used to demonize Africans and shackle them in the bonds of slavery (Morrison, *Beloved* 61). Sethe asks for the mark to be put upon herself, unabashedly embracing her African heritage; instead of obliging her daughter's request, however, Sethe tells Denver that her mother slapped her, a gesture which she did not understand "till [she] had a mark of [her] own."

Literary scholar at the University of Laguna Justine Tally offers an interesting view on how Morrison might seek to reclaim authority and change the minds and sympathies of contemporary Americans. Tally mentions the scar on Sethe's back, which Amy Denver compares to "a chokecherry tree" in the novel (79). Tally discusses this tree-like feature, "made up of dead, unfeeling scars, [which] may also be not only symbolic of the devastation of slavery and collective and personal tragedy . . . but a call to the 'Tree of Life' and the 'Tree of Knowledge' that draws on the dawn of civilization in Africa" (Tally 107). Indeed, Amy Denver's own description of the scar seems to justify Tally's claim:

It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a

whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder (79).

Even biologists in the twenty-first century apply the term “Tree of Life” to describe the phylogenetic relationship between not only humans, but all life on Earth. I agree with Tally’s interpretation that the scar may come to represent the human component of the tree of life stemming from Africa, as Sethe’s black beaten body even has whitish features on it, signifying the inclusion not only of the African race, but even the white race, reminding the audience that all of humanity, no matter what color one’s skin may appear, originated on the African continent. Amy’s language supports this claim and seems to counter the outdated biblical claims of slavery as a result of the curse of Canaan, as she muses on what exactly “God have in mind.” Morrison realizes that the white race has always had the authority and power to articulate what God has in mind, and now she uses her text to reinterpret the workings of the creator of all life.

Even in the twentieth century, trying to argue against historical arguments which have been strengthened through citing the sacred text of the Bible, writing an American novel in which the African characters are undeniably sympathetic and dignified to the audience, would indeed be a daunting task. Keeping up with her assertion that there has never historically been good sympathetic African-American characters, it seems that Morrison seeks in *Beloved* to reclaim the African-American voice; rather than relying on past authors, who by and large were mostly white men, Morrison desires nothing more than to create a respected African-American voice in her literature, as she herself has said, taking back a people’s voice is “like humor: You have to take the authority back; you realign where the power is. So I wanted to *take* the power. They were very inventive and imaginative with cruelty, so I have to take it back—in a way that I can tell

it. And that is the satisfaction” (Morrison, qtd. in Caldwell 245). Taking back that authority does not only mean taking it from contemporary racists and those unsympathetic to the plight of African-Americans, it means taking it back even from historical statements which seemed to be supported by the Bible, a challenge which few people would take lightly, even in the present-day.

The other possible inspiration behind Sethe’s name, that of the Egyptian god, is one which particularly intrigues Tally, who elaborates upon the relationship between this god of confusion and Morrison’s protagonist in her book examining the origins of *Beloved*. The actual name of the god is thought to mean darkness, another possible identifier of Sethe as an African with dark skin. In ancient Egyptian mythology, Seth is the god who, angry upon discovering that his wife has become pregnant by his brother Osiris, kills his brother by chopping him into fourteen parts and then scattering those parts all over Egypt. One of the similarities drawn between the ancient story of Seth and Osiris and that of Sethe and Beloved lies in the detail of seduction, which leads to an act of revenge in Seth’s murder of Osiris, or is the act of revenge itself stemming from Beloved’s anger that Sethe murdered her, even if it was done as an act of love.

With all of this being said, how does Morrison wish the flesh-and-blood African Americans of today to respond to her text? The answer, I believe, lies in the portrayal of history and haunting so far discussed, as well as the incredibly human and sympathetic characters of the text, the most human and sympathetic in my mind being Sethe herself. For perhaps one of the first times in American fiction, a black author has created black characters drawn from historical and real-life experience in order to tell a story that transcends time itself.

The key to how Morrison wants the book to be received lies also in two important colloquialisms present throughout the book: those of rememory and disremembering. Although the latter of these is acknowledged by Merriam-Webster as a legitimate English word, I believe that Morrison uses it in a different sense from the recognized definition, particularly when one considers that the usual prefix associated with the opposite of re- is un-. Morrison does not use the term *unremembered* or *unremembering* to describe what some of the African-American community in the text do, especially after the final confrontation with Beloved's spirit, but "*disremembered*" (emphasis added) (Morrison, *Beloved* 274). The powerful use of this prefix in place of the traditional one signifies a seemingly deliberate separation between the living conscious beings and the experience they have just had with a malevolent spirit, an experience which might cause pain in the "rememories" of those who lived through it. The prefix dis- calls to mind words such as disrespect, disembody, or dismember. Notice that all of these words call to mind a purposeful action, something intentional performed by the doer. Un- is a more passive prefix, describing a condition rather than an action. Thus, one can be unrespectable, but cannot unrespect; something can be unembodied, but one cannot actively unembody something. The critical use of the prefix dis- in the language, particularly in the third section of the novel, lends an essential nuance to the text as a whole.

Examining the word in context, disremember appears in the text to mean the severing of the conscious thought of the observer from the action observed, truly killing the memory of the event, making it very much a specter like Beloved's own ghost. The ending refrain of "It was not a story to pass on" and the final variation of "This is not a story to pass on" in the last pages of the novel summarize the fictional community's way

of dealing with the matter of how to progress after *Beloved*, not too unlike the slaves who found themselves at once freed from the bonds of slavery, yet still had to address the issue of their absence of legal rights and representation under the law at the time.

Morrison does not want the contemporary African-American community to forget or actively disremember the horrible reality of slavery in history, much like Sethe's own community actively disremembers the uncomfortable reality of *Beloved*'s presence and the toll that presence had taken on Sethe's physical, mental, and psychological health.

The result of this disremembering is "by and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there" (275). Morrison realizes that disassociating oneself with personal history is as dangerous as forgetting the natural world. Forgetting *Beloved* leads to a mentality in the Cincinnati community which causes them to forget about the whole of creation as well. Morrison emphasizes that there is little separating the physical from the spiritual, just as there is little separating the past from the present. She seems to echo yet again the biblical charge not to forget the mistakes and hardships of history.

For Morrison, that history touches *all* of the past—African-Americans' stories do not begin when their ancestors were uprooted from their homes in Africa and forcibly brought to the United States; rather, the author emphasizes the African as well as the American, realizing that perhaps the African history runs deeper in her veins and in the veins of her fellow blacks. Combining the biblical and ancient Egyptian mythological undertones becomes indicative of the whole history of the African race, which is thought to be the oldest of all the races. Sethe's chokecherry tree scar, then, represents not only the tree of life, but the tree of history—the unrecoverable past which has led year by year,

generation by generation, up to the present day. Just as Sethe cannot disremember the scar, Morrison cannot allow her fellow African-Americans to disremember their people's past, the same mistake which Sethe's fictional black community makes after exorcising the ghost of Beloved.

At the same time, however, Morrison does not want contemporary African-Americans to become consumed by the reality of that slavery as Sethe is almost consumed by Beloved. In an interview with Elsie B. Washington shortly after the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison states that in writing the book, she wished "to explore how a people . . . absorbs and rejects information on a very personal level about something . . . that is undigestible and unabsorbable, completely" (qtd. in Washington 235). The ways in which an individual or group rejects that information is evident, as already stated, in the community at large. Sethe represents the other extreme of the spectrum. As Beloved spends more time around Sethe, the mother becomes weaker and weaker, haunted to the point of physical malnutrition, while the fearful apparition becomes larger. Contrary to what one might think, however, Beloved does not get stronger draining energy from Sethe's feelings of guilt. Indeed, we are told that the ghost is "getting bigger, [but] seemed nevertheless exhausted as [Denver and Sethe] were" (*Beloved* 242). As Beloved comes to symbolize more and more Sethe's dark past, it becomes evident that Morrison argues that the prolonged focusing of oneself on the horrible reality of past slaves and their existences does nothing to strengthen that reality. Just as Beloved is exhausted and weak from parasitically draining Sethe's own strength, so does the parasite that is the history of slavery not become stronger through the dwellings-on of present-day African-Americans and others who sympathize with the

psychological musings of slaves' descendants about their ancestors' fates.

While the community at large disremembers *Beloved*'s existence at the end of the novel, Sethe cannot focus on anything but *Beloved* while she is in her midst on account of her feelings of guilt for what she felt she had to do to her poor infant child. I believe that Morrison does not endorse either of these views. A compromise between the two must be made, where one does not forget the past on account that every present moment is a sum of all of the factors that have become before it, but one also does not dwell exclusively on and become obsessed with the past sins and fates of others, even those beloved by the present individual. Morrison's dedication in the novel "Sixty Million and More" is a beautiful way of exemplifying this sort of approach to history and its effects on the present-day observer. The utter simplicity of the dedication reflects the commemorative nature of the novel as a tribute to the slaves whose voices had been silenced and stolen as they were uprooted from their homes in Africa. Human community must progress forward and continue to write new histories and pass on new stories, whether those stories tell good histories or bad ones.

Toni Morrison's exquisite novel *Beloved* provides a glimpse at an individual and a community trying to deal with their troubled and, indeed, haunted past, portraying the various ways in which the troubles and ghosts of history inextricably bind themselves to the individual experience and existence. Morrison herself has stated that the people in the novel lived in "the days of Black people who really loved the company of other Black people . . . We're just distracted [now], that's all" (qtd. in Washington 235). The extraordinary author wishes to reunite contemporary African-Americans through the reinterpretation of their people's past—one that does not limit itself to their ancestors'

arrival upon American shores. In fact, it extends all the way back to biblical times and even ancient Egypt. In a society where Black people perhaps still feel alienated from their white or even African neighbors, Morrison beckons contemporary African-Americans to step out “where small things scratched and sometimes touched. Where words could be spoken that would close your ears shut. Where, if you were alone, feeling could overtake you and stick to you like a shadow” (*Beloved* 243). Fellow African-Americans are “out there” as well, though, and a reinvigorated sense of community in their people’s cultural heritage and pride, even the ugly reality of slavery, cannot be achieved in the modern day if that people allows itself to disremember its own past. At one point in the novel, Sethe makes the comment “Funny how you lose sight of some things and memory others” (201). Toni Morrison makes a call throughout her text not to lose sight of where her people have come from, what they have been through, and how that knowledge affects them in the present-day.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Legacy of *Beloved*

Toni Morrison stands out as one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century. Her approach to the cultural situation of contemporary African-Americans through the lens of a neo-slave narrative brilliantly addresses the issue of how black Americans in the present day should deal with and process the grave reality of their ancestors' enslavement. The problem of history and its haunting effect on the present day is evident throughout the entirety of the text, as Sethe reflects upon and to a certain extent relives the past traumas of her life as a slave. As history pushes forward into the present day and beyond, Morrison looks backward from the perspective of a twentieth-century descendant of slaves in order to craft a work which at once emphasizes the truly brutal horror of slavery while memorializing those whose lives were wasted and lost to a tragic institution. The author not only looks back toward the beginning of American civilization, but even further than that to the dawn of civilization, seeking to remind the audience that the phylogenic human tree of life begins in Africa and spreads out to the ends of the earth from there. The sense of unity that should exist between African-Americans, and all of humanity even, is no longer evident in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Morrison seeks to rectify this disunity through the writing of a beautifully crafted novel where African-Americans not only unite with their contemporary neighbors, but also with the slaves from past eras who are no longer alive. Just as the past unites with the present throughout the book, so too should the present human beings unite with their ancestors in a wonderfully unbreakable way.

In her essay “Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and *Beloved*,” Maggie Sale argues that *Beloved* itself is a form of history, as the “call-and-response patterns and the communal nature of art, the always operative, but sometimes masked, factor of perspective [of history] is foregrounded” throughout the text (Maggie Sale 179). She develops her idea of history as personal perspective through stating that “master versions of history . . . erroneously present themselves as independent of their makers and so of any particular perspective.” In other words, history is in the eye of the beholder. The history textbooks nowadays, which claim to be written free of personal bias or agenda, are nevertheless bound by authorial perspective, rather than pure objective truth. As stated in Chapter Two, then, the true facts of history become irrelevant in Morrison’s text, as nothing else matters other than the fact that slavery happened. Black Africans, who have been demonized since biblical times, were brought forcibly from their homes to the New World in order to work ceaselessly for an economy which did not care whether they lived or died, as long as the job was done. The idea presented in Chapter Three that African-Americans were seen as objects or *things* rather than real live human beings is apparent even in “the picture of Sethe accompanying the newspaper article detailing her ‘crime’ [which] is emblematic of how the majority of African Americans in the nineteenth century were objects of writing, rather than producers and consumers.”

This idea of African-Americans as objects of writing is evident even in the works of their white sympathizers such as Mark Twain, who no doubt had the best of intentions in writing his novel *Huckleberry Finn*, but Morrison is indeed correct to feel somewhat gipped as an African-American because her people were not seen at the time as capable

of writing such a sympathetic or enlightened text. Thus, living in a post-Civil Rights era America, she looks back to history, to the nineteenth century, to situate her text, so that she may be the voice for the “sixty million and more” who were thought by society never to have one.

By looking to the past, the “call-and-response patterns [throughout the text] are related to audience (reader) participation in that the text suggests, or calls, implicitly asking for a response” (Maggie Sale 180). The response can, of course, come from white readers, such as the author of this thesis; but an even more beautiful interpretation of that response comes from the African-American community itself. Just as the Cincinnati community of the text rallies together towards the end of the novel to free Sethe from the bondage of her past, so too does Morrison rally together her contemporary community in order to provide a cathartic experience in which Blacks can confront the horrible fates of their ancestors, while still not dwelling upon and becoming consumed by that same past. The past is in the past, yet it still exists in the lives of the contemporary African-American community. Morrison does not want her contemporary peers to disremember the past, making their ancestors’ story “not a story to pass on” (*Beloved* 275). History is an active participant in the lives of those present today.

Toni Morrison has stated in her own words that “the central action of *Beloved* posed the perfect dilemma, for [her] as a writer, from which to explore things [she] wanted to understand about that period of slavery” and the people, particularly women, who were trying to hold on to what was important to them (qtd. in Washington 235). By writing about that particular period for her own people, I believe that Morrison has done something no less than spectacular, as she has discovered a way to talk about slavery in

the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in a way that can inspire those still living and commemorate those from the past whom the world will probably know little to nothing about.

The final word of the novel, “Beloved,” echoes in the minds and hearts of countless readers who have been enthralled by her novel for nearly 30 years (275). The word stands out not only as a final motif in the framework of the novel, but also as an implicit address to the sixty million and more and, indeed, the entire African culture from the beginning of time. Morrison uses the adjective almost as a command, to *be loved*, perhaps, and to embrace the beautiful heritage of what it is to be Black in America. The word itself exquisitely sums up the relationship between history and the present, ancestors and the contemporary community, as one cannot exist without the other, one lives off of the other, one should love the other.

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