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SLAVERY'S DESTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON

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Abstract

Beloved is the novel written in 1987 by Toni Morrison. It represents the rebirth of black identity among downtrodden people. For Morrison, to recuperate from slavery means to pull through the home that has been unfortunately lost. Sethe opens herself to speak about her reminiscences and evoke her story, she cannot recuperate her identity and her body remains crippled and thus her identity remains wounded.

Keywords: *Slavery, identity, self-conception, beloved*

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931 and spent her first year of life in Ohio. She has completed her UG degree in English from Howard University and PG at Cornell. Her friends had difficulty in pronouncing her uncommon first name, so she changed it to Toni. She married Harold Morrison in 1958 and had two sons. After six years, she divorced him. After completing her academic career at Howard, Morrison became an Editor at Random House. At the same time, she started building a body of creative work in 1993. It made her the first African- American woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Toni Morrison wrote her novel *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. It was followed by *Sula* in 1974 which secured Morrison a nomination for the National Book Award. In 1977, Morrison won the National Book Critics Circle Award for her book *Song of Solomon*. Her other works include *Tar Baby* in 1981, *Jazz* in 1992, *Paradise* in 1998 and *Beloved* which made her to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1988.

Beloved, the novel set during the reconstruction era in 1873. It centers on the powers of memory and history. For the former slaves in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and willfully try to forget. Yet for Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, memories of slavery are inescapable. They continue to haunt her, literally in the spirit of her deceased daughter. Eighteen years earlier, Sethe had murdered his daughter in order to save her from a life of slavery. Toni Morrison borrowed the event from the real story of Margaret Garner, who like

Sethe escaped from slavery in Kentucky and murdered her child when slave catchers caught up with her in Ohio. *Beloved* straddles the line between fiction and history from the experiences of a single family.

Sethe and her daughter, Denver, lived in a haunted two-storey house at 124 Bluestone Road outside Ohio. As a matter of fact, her house was once a way station. Historically, the way station was a cherished salvation for enslaves who lacked food, clothing, and safe passage among the whites. The way station also served as a postal centre, and message drop. Chance meetings with other wayfarers sometimes reunited them with friends and loved ones.

In addition, the way station provided a warm, dry and safe rest stop along the wearying road away from slavery. In that house, Denver is a reclusive 18 years old daughter who once upon a time lived with her two brothers: Buglar, Howard, and her infant sister, *Beloved*. Now they are "all by themselves in the gray and white house on Bluestone Road" (p.3).

Sethe's tangled internal monologue. Being the victim of slavery, Sethe often thought about her daughter and had lived with her daughter's ghost for years. Being inferior to others, Sethe thinks that this feature is the best way to save her child from slavery, from being treated just like an animal. For her, it is a natural right to protect her child from the apparition of slavery; while on the other hand, it is something against the law of nature.

Hence, Morrison alludes to an important idea at that time when Sethe's picture appeared in a white

newspaper. News about blacks does not normally appear in white papers unless something terrible enough has occurred to capture the white reader's interest. Just as it is unnatural for the white community to acknowledge any blacks; it is unnatural for a black community made up of ex-slaves not to protect their own from white slave catches. That is what happened on the day Sethe tried to murder her child.

Beloved explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual destruction wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt those characters who are former slaves even in freedom. The most hazardous of slavery's effects is its negative collision on the former slaves' senses of self, and the novel contains multiple examples of self-alienation. Paul D, for instance, is so alienated from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else's. Slaves were told they were subhuman and were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars.

Consequently, Paul D is very timid about whether or not he could possibly be a real man and he frequently wonders about his value as a person. Sethe was treated as a subhuman. She once walked in on schoolteacher giving his pupils a lesson on her animal characteristics. She, too, seems to be estranged from herself and filled with self-loathing. Thus, she sees the best part of herself as her children. Yet her children also have volatile, unstable identities. Denver conflates her identity with Beloved's, and Beloved feels herself actually beginning to physically disintegrate.

Slavery has also limited Baby Suggs's self-conception by shattering her family and denying her the opportunity to be a true wife, sister, daughter, or loving mother. As a result of their inability to believe in their own existences, both Baby Suggs and Paul D become miserable and tired. Baby Suggs's fatigue is spiritual, while Paul D's is emotional. While a slave, Paul D developed self-defeating coping strategies to protect him from the emotional pain he was forced to endure. Any feelings he had were locked away in the rusted tobacco tin of his heart, and he concluded that one should love nothing too intensely.

Other slaves—Jackson Till, Aunt Phyllis, and Halle—went insane and thus suffered a complete loss of self. Sethe fears that she, too, will end her days in madness. Indeed, she does prove to be mad when she kills her own daughter. Yet Sethe's act of infanticide illuminates the vicious forces of the institution of slavery: under slavery, a mother best expresses her love for her children by murdering them and thus protecting them from the more gradual destruction wrought by slavery.

Stamp Paid muses that slavery's negative consequences are not limited to the slaves. The sinister effects of the institution affect not only the identities of its black victims but those of the whites who are behind it and the collective identity of Americans. Where slavery exists, everyone suffers a loss of humanity and compassion. For this reason, Morrison suggests that our nation's identity, like the novel's characters, must be healed. America's future depends on its understanding of the past: just as Sethe must come to terms with her past before she can secure a future with Denver and Paul D. Morrison writes history with the voices of a people historically denied the power of language, and *Beloved* convalesces a history that had been lost—either due to willed forgetfulness (as in Sethe's repression of her memories) or to forced silence (as in the case of Paul D's iron bit).

Beloved is a novel in the gothic tradition, as it takes place in a setting that has been totally bothered and dehumanized. The remnants of slavery hang over every event in the book, with the lingering collective memories of slavery affecting all aspects of the text. This emotionally extreme form of storytelling is particularly gothic in that it denies resolution. At the end of the novel, the reader is left with a broken protagonist with a questionable future. Furthermore, this self-defeating cycle of tyranny has not at all been quelled by the events in the novel. One would expect that some sort of lesson would be learned, or at least an accord on some change would be reached.

Beloved denies the reader any resolution, and repression is shown to be alive and well at the end, the cycle beginning once more. They forgot her like a bad

dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. The community who helped exorcises Beloved inhibits the memory just as Sethe had introverted Beloved's memory years before.

In this manner, Beloved grows to represent not only Sethe's repressed unconscious, but the repressed collective unconscious of the black community. One would expect that at least Sethe, Denver, and Paul D to remember Beloved, but while "It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, (323)" they eventually did forget once more.

Eventually they apprehended that they could not "remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. (324)" The ease at which the family at 124 represses the memory of Beloved speaks to the ease at which society chooses to ignore that which causes any discomfort or nervousness.

Sethe, the heroine, cannot overcome her outrage and sense of violation from her Sweet Home experiences, nor can she work through the guilt she feels

about her daughter's death. Although Sethe and Paul D. are both dehumanized during their slavery experiences by the inhumanity of the white people, their responses to the experience differ due to their different role. Sethe managed to create her own family with Paul D. Within her psyche, she is a new and a different woman.

Thus, Sethe's process of remedial in Beloved, her process of learning to live with her past, is a model for the readers who must confront Sethe's past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right where we live. On the other hand, we have Paul D. who initially appeared to be a normalizing force in Sethe's and Denver's lives. His entrance into their private lives signaled the beginning of a healthy relationship for Sethe and the foreword of a father figure for Denver.

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