



THEMATIC CONCERNS IN THE "BELOVED" BY TONI MORRISON

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's fiction revolves around black women defining their roles and striving to survive in a male dominated society. Her work is also often heavily influenced by her inheritance of the African American culture. Beloved explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt those characters who are former slaves even in freedom. From the beginning, Beloved focuses on the import of memory and history. Sethe struggles daily with the haunting legacy of slavery, in the form of her threatening memories and also in the form of her daughter's aggressive ghost. It also demonstrates the extent to which individuals need the support of their communities in order to survive. In brief, closing chapter of the book, Morrison returns the narration to a more universalized, abstracted, and distanced voice. The result is poetic: words rhyme and phrases repeat, affecting an almost trance-like state in the reader.

KEYWORDS : self-alienation, inheritance, community, spiritual devastation.

The Noble Prize winning Toni Morrison is an American author, editor and renowned professor. And, to winning the Nobel Prize in 1993, she was also awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Beloved* in 1987. She is best known for writing novels with detailed characters, epic themes and brilliant dialogue. A lot of her works revolve around black women defining their roles and striving to survive in a male dominated society. Morrison's work is also often heavily influenced by her inheritance of the African American culture.

Morrison has dealt with the themes of oppression, violence and sacrifice in a lot of her works. Her novels are *Beloved*, *Tar Baby*, *The Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. All her works are suffused with violence; Morrison has dealt with violence in each novel in a unique way. The conflict between the white and the black communities, the victimization of the blacks by the dominant whites, the bloodshed and violence within the black communities have been highlighted nowhere so effectively in the whole American fiction.

"One of the nice things that women do," she said, "is nurture and love something other than themselves - they do that rather nicely. Instinctively, perhaps, but they are certainly taught to do it, socialized to do it, or genetically predisposed to do it - whatever it is, it's something that I think the majority of women feel strongly about. But mother love is also a killer."

"*Beloved*" is a ghost story - a young woman suddenly appears eighteen years after the child's death, and the characters believe she is the slain infant returned to earth. "I wanted it to be our past," she said, "which is haunting, and her past, which is haunting - the way memory never really leaves you unless you have gone through it and confronted it head on. But I wanted that haunting not to be really a suggestion of being bedeviled by the past, but to have it be incarnate, to have it actually happen that a person enters your world who is in fact - you believe, at any rate - the dead returned, and you get a second chance, a chance to do it right. Of course, you do it wrong again."

From the beginning, *Beloved* focuses on the import of memory and history. Sethe struggles daily with the haunting legacy of slavery, in the form of her threatening memories and also in the form of her daughter's aggressive ghost. For Sethe, the present is mostly a struggle to beat back the past, because the memories of her daughter's death and the experiences at Sweet Home are too painful for her to recall consciously. But Sethe's repression is problematic, because the absence of history and memory inhibits the construction of a stable identity. Even Sethe's hard-won freedom is threatened by her inability to confront her prior life. Paul D's arrival gives Sethe the opportunity and the impetus to finally come to terms with her painful life history.

Beloved demonstrates the extent to which individuals need the support of

their communities in order to survive. Sethe first begins to develop her sense of self during her twenty-eight days of freedom, when she becomes a part of the Cincinnati community. Similarly, Denver discovers herself and grows up when she leaves 124 and becomes a part of society. Paul D and his fellow prison inmates in Georgia prove able to escape only by working together. They are literally chained to one another, and Paul D recalls that "if one lost, all lost." Lastly, it is the community that saves Sethe from mistakenly killing Mr. Bodwin and casting the shadow of another sin across her and her family's life.

Beloved explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt those characters who are former slaves even in freedom. The most dangerous of slavery's effects is its negative impact 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 insecure about whether or not he could possibly be a real "man," and he frequently wonders about his value as a person.

Sethe, also, 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 alienated from her 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.

Beloved performs a similar function. The novel catalogs a past that contemporary readers must contend with before moving forward. Through most of the book, the narrator filters almost the entire story through the various perspectives of Sethe, Paul D, Denver, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, schoolteacher, Lady Jones, Mr. Bodwin, *Beloved*, and Ella. In the short, closing chapter of the book, Morrison returns the narration to a more universalized, abstracted, and distanced voice. The result is poetic: words rhyme and phrases repeat, affecting an almost trance-like state in the reader. Morrison punctuates these mesmerizing, cadenced paragraphs, describing how everyone gradually forgot *Beloved*, with the blunt explanation, "It was not a story to pass on."

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