



Book Review on Tony Morrison’s Beloved

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KEYWORDS

Introduction

Toni Morrison is a Nobel Prize- and Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist. Among her best known novels are *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. The 1987 novel, "Beloved", won the Pulitzer Prize and led to Nobel Prize for Literature. This Review will cover the summary and analysis of "Beloved".

Plot

Beloved is based on fact, which makes it all that much more horrifying. Morrison’s inspiration for the story was Margaret Garner, who killed her two-year-old daughter in 1856, to keep her from being returned to slavery. Before she could kill the rest of her children and herself, slave catchers pried the knife from her fingers. On the backbone of this gruesome story, Morrison builds *Beloved*, a novel of a baby who haunts the mother who killed her. This lesson will focus on the summary and analysis of *Beloved*. The story opens in Cincinnati, where former slave and current cook **Sethe** lives at 124 Bluestone Road with her daughter **Denver** and her mother-in-law, **Baby Suggs**. Fifteen years before the start of the story, Sethe killed her infant daughter, trying to keep her from being brought back into slavery. The community knows about the murder and rejects Sethe. Sethe’s two sons, **Buglar** and **Howard**, left years before the novel’s start.

After Baby Suggs’ death, Denver and Sethe are alone in the house...with the **ghost** of the baby who died years ago. Furniture, and even people, often move around mysteriously. Sethe has accepted her lot, at least until **Paul D Garner**, who knows Sethe from their slavery days, arrives at the house. Sethe welcomes Paul D into the house, and the two become a couple. Denver is not happy about this arrangement. However, the ghost of the baby has seemed to disappear, and Denver and Sethe breathe a sigh of relief.

When a strange woman shows up at their house, Denver is thrilled to have someone to talk to. The woman introduces herself as **Beloved**, which is the name of Sethe’s murdered baby. Beloved knows things she shouldn’t be able to. Though she makes Sethe uncomfortable, she lets Beloved stay because Denver needs a friend. Sethe wonders if Beloved could be her own daughter, returned from the grave. Paul D wants the girl to leave, but he has no say. He doesn’t own the house and isn’t officially part of the family.

Beloved wants to own everything Sethe has, including Paul D. She seduces him. Then Paul D hears from a family friend that Sethe killed her baby. When he challenges Sethe with the truth, they fight and he storms out. Sethe isn’t bothered; she focuses all her attention on Beloved, leaving Denver wondering what has happened to her mother. Beloved’s attention to Denver and Sethe changes. Sethe, spending all her time with Beloved, loses her job and soon money and food are scarce at 124 Bluestone Road. Denver, who hasn’t left the house in years, has to go and ask for help. She gets a job to provide for her mother and the pregnant Beloved. The women of the

town decide Beloved is haunting Sethe and have an exorcism. Denver’s employer **Mr. Bodwin**, who is a white man, arrives to take her to work. Seeing this, Sethe imagines again the slave catcher coming to take her children away, and attacks the man with an ice pick. When the craziness settles, Sethe is safe, and so is Mr. Bodwin. Beloved has simply disappeared. Paul D returns and he and Sethe make up. No one ever finds out what happened to Beloved.

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. *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 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 depressed 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 perverse 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: he notes that slavery causes whites to become "changed and altered . . . made . . . bloody, silly, worse than they ever wanted to be." The insidious effects of

the institution affect not only the identities of its black victims but those of the whites who perpetrate 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, before we can address slavery's legacy in the contemporary problems of racial discrimination and discord, we must confront the dark and hidden corners of our history. Crucially, in *Beloved*, we learn about the history and legacy of slavery not from schoolteacher's or even from the Bodwins' point of view but rather from Sethe's, Paul D's, Stamp Paid's, and Baby Suggs's. Morrison writes history with the voices of a people historically denied the power of language, and *Beloved* recuperates a history that had been lost—either due to willed forgetfulness (as in Sethe's repression of her memories) or to forced silence.

"I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened." (3.88)

Narrative Style

The structure of the work is compounded with an ever-switching point of view. Every character, even the dead ones and half-alive ones, tell parts of the tale. At one point, Paul D and Sethe exchange flashbacks that finally meld into one whole (chapter 2). At another, the point of view switches off between four white people, who unreservedly show the biased point of view of some men who view slaves as tamed animals. The diversity of the point of view creates a tapestry of people who interact—individuals joined by past or present into a community.

Very few readers will miss the experimental structure of *Beloved*. It is not a linear tale, told from beginning to end. It is a story encompassing levels of past, from the slave ship to Sweet home, as well as the present. Sometimes the past is told in flashbacks, sometimes in stories, and sometimes it is plainly told, as if it were happening in the present (with highly unusual use of the present tense). The novel is, in essence, written in fragments, pieces shattered and left for the reader to place together. The juxtaposition of past with present serves to reinforce the idea that the past is alive in the present, and by giving us fragments to work with Morrison melds the entire story into one inseparable piece to be gazed at. In forcing the reader to put back the pieces, Morrison forces him also to think about them and consider the worth of each. From a stylistic perspective, Morrison's artistry in this regard is nothing short of breath taking. Morrison's use of both verse and stream of consciousness writing where necessary is unsurpassed and not often matched in literature. Strict narrative, she realizes, is not enough to capture the feelings of a people, and she manages to capture them in some of the most well-known passages of modern literature.

Finally, her use of objective correlativism should be noted. The use of Biblical allusions and much ambiguous symbolism creates an atmosphere riddled with force and drama. *Beloved* is meant to be more than a story—it is a history, and it is a life.

Critics' Observations

The publication of *Beloved* was much acclaimed and recognized by many renowned Newspapers. It is stated in Stephen Metcalf is *Slate*'s critic at large. He is working on a book about the 1980s.

Beloved still widely regarded as her masterpiece, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Three legs make a stool: This past month, in a *New York Times* poll of 200 critics, writers, and editors, *Beloved* was named "the single best work of American fiction published in the last twenty-five years," **beating out novels by such luminaries as Roth, DeLillo, and Updike. I participated in this survey and can attest that, from the moment the solicitously hand-typed letter from the Times Book Review arrived in the mail, Beloved was the presumptive winner.**

Works cited:

Primary Source:

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