

**TRUTH AND FICTION IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*:  
PERSPECTIVES OF 'OTHERNESS'**

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*Abstract: The morality behind a story has been, for a long time, a driving force. This was unavoidable in traditional literature yet its importance in modern times seems to have diminished. At the origin of this shift lies the notion that fiction is, in the end, nothing more than language. Some authors, however, do exactly the opposite. They do not move around ethic dilemmas, they charge directly at them. In light of all this, we have chosen slavery and its repercussions as the main focus of our paper and have decided to refer to the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison in order to better illustrate the consequences. The reason behind the central act of the novel can easily be located in the treatment some white masters applied to their slaves and it was the perceived 'otherness' of the slave that was usually the reason behind such treatment. The book does not discuss only the white/black dichotomy. Due to the mother's remorse there is also the visitor/perceived specter that can easily be seen as 'the other' for reasons that have nothing to do with ethnicity or racism.*

*Keywords: fiction, literature, morality, otherness, reality, slavery*

### **Introduction**

The novel is a method of maintaining a connection with the ancestors because it can be used as a tool for memory. Even so, when all is said and done, a novel is a form of literature, not history. It can have its own perspective on reality but it cannot reveal the truth at its fullest. Not even memory can achieve that due to its ultimate subjectiveness. Toni Morrison was aware of this fact: "Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was – that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way." (Morrison quoted in Rushdy, 1999, p. 37) Because personal memory is a conscious or unconscious choice on interpreting history, then it is very important, as Morrison herself acknowledged, to find the motivation behind the choice. This is also true in the case of literature and even more so for *Beloved* where we have to deal both with the interpretation of the author and the multiple perspectives of various characters and a series of events that they do not wish to remember. *Beloved* does not deal only with historical facts but also with the inner lives of former slaves. Their memories were filled with events and places they wanted to escape from. After they succeeded in physically running away they could not help but take with them the memories of their previous years. They could not leave behind those memories but they struggled against them from time to time and tried to block them. They did not always succeed but for them the past and their memories were a source of grief (McKay, 1999, p. 10). In order for the story to be passed on, the former slaves needed to learn how to overcome their pain and their past.

The motivation behind Toni Morrison's choice of perspective comes from the desire to separate that which must be maintained from that which must be left behind. She wanted to show the past in a way that is useful to the present. She writes history in a way that does not

abolish it but mutates it into something artistic. Events are revisioned and rewritten, but not completely in one direction or the other. She does not create either “the orthodoxy of victimage” or a “master plot of victim and victimizer” (Rushdy, 1999, p. 37-38). The broad subject of the novel is not those whose names appear written in history books but those whose names remain as unspoken as their story. These untold tales are what Morrison is trying to portray (Bradbury, 1992, p. 266). This lack of historical remembrance cumulated with the absence of official public commemoration is what led her to write *Beloved*.

The writings of Toni Morrison have a lot to do with remembrance and with the rewriting of “an inherited history” because she is trying to present in another way the people from a certain period. She has chosen “the task of reviving the very figures of that history” (Rushdy, 1999 p. 38). The background of the novel originates in the project she began in 1974 together with Middleton Harris, Morris Lewitt, Robert Furrman and Ernest Smith: editing *The Black Book*. The purpose of the final product was to serve as “a corrective to much of the rhetoric of the radical wing of the Civil Rights Movement, which she feared was discrepantful of the lived experiences of many who survived slavery and/or oppressions that came in its aftermath.” (McKay, 1999, p. 6). They gathered material in every way possible, from anyone who wanted to contribute to searching for materials in the attics of their friends. In the materials gathered for this project Morrison found stories that would greatly influence the writing of *Beloved*. The most important was related to Margaret Garner, an African-American slave from Kentucky who killed one of her own children before they were captured so that her daughter would not have to go through the same life she had (Denard, 2008, p. XVII-XVIII).

### **The Real and the Imaginary in *Beloved***

From the first lines the situation at 124 is described and the cause is quickly stated. “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom.” Why this is so is not rapidly explained. Still, with everything that was going on around them, Sethe and Denver decided to challenge the ghost and ask her to come out but she did not. Sethe said that the ghost of someone so young cannot understand much, at which Denver replied that the spirit, young as she was, was also very powerful. The mother, Sethe, counters the argument of her daughter Denver: “No more powerful than the way I loved her” (Morrison, 2004, p. 3-5). The theme of love will appear multiple times.

When Sethe asked her mother-in-law Baby Suggs if they should find a different place to live in because of what was happening in the house, the old woman gives an answer that might seem shocking to some. Her answer, though, points out the hardships she had to endure in life:

“What’d be the point,” asked Baby Suggs. Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband’s spirit was to come back in here? Don’t talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don’t you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased and all, I expect, worrying somebody’s house into evil.” Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows. “My firstborn. All I can remember of her is

how she loved the burned bottom of the bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember." (Morison, 2004, p. 6).

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the real or imaginary nature of being haunted. However, regarding Baby Suggs's mention of the loss of her children, there is some truth in that. Even though the character itself is in no way historical, what she said about losing her children was true in the case of many slave mothers. They were powerless against slave masters and could not protect their children from being whipped if it came to that. It was a terrible thing, either for the son who heard her mother say "I cannot do anything for you!" or for the mother who had to speak those words (Stroyer, 1885, p. 19-20). Mothers also had to live with the fear of having their sons and daughters sold at any moment and, even when they lived on the same plantation with their offspring, they still could not spend a lot of time with them (Pennington, 1849, p. 1-11). Other details, however, are scarce, even in African-American slave narratives which, when it came to events that were either hard to describe or unpleasant to read, sometimes used a certain phrase and allowed the reader to imagine what he would. The convention of the times was to name the action but not describe it. When it came to those moments they would simply write something like 'but let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.' This usually implied the rape or sexual exploitation of slave women by white men. Morison believes that the veil needs to be torn open so that the inner lives of slaves would be made clearer. There is no other alternative, she believes, for even though no other slave society in history wrote more about its own enslavement, an unshattered veil hides the truth (Henderson, 1999, p. 81).

By attempting to complete the slave narrative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Morrison also enacts another revision on a metaphor made by DuBois who implied that there was a feeling of otherness in society between those of white and black ancestry. Morrison takes it further, talking about a division within the African-American community. She wants to deal not only with the speakable and the unspeakable, but also with the unspoken. There are things which can be said and there are things which have only been partially told because they have been mentioned but not described. However, there are also events which have been left aside and which Morrison wishes to approach (Henderson, 1999, p. 81). History is usually written by the victors either in their own ink or by their power to provide and impose an alternative form of remembering or recovering. The truth can thus be partially altered or subverted. Morison wants to leave that aside and find truth outside history because "what becomes 'known' as history is not all there is to know" (Morrison quoted in Matus, 1998, p. 9). For that to happen it must bring forth something new or bring back what has for a long time been left behind. There a scene in the novel that puts this into very plain words: "Anything dead coming back to life hurts." (Morison, 2004, p. 42).

One can know slavery from books but a complete understanding eludes us. We might learn the details, large and small, but we cannot feel it in our hearts. That requires experience. Morrison painted this out very well in a discussion between Sethe and her daughter Denver on the topic of marking humans. Sethe revealed to Denver how her own mother was marked and how she was told that if something were to happen to her mother Sethe would have to search for her and recognize her by that mark alone. Wanting a sign of her own Sethe told her mother that she wished to be marked so that her mother would know what to look for. Her

mother slapped Sethe and Sethe told Denver that only afterwards, after she truly had a mark of her own, did she really understand her mother's gesture (Morrison, 2004, p. 72-73).

By marking slaves that way the master claimed dominance. He defines how a slave is to be recognized while the slave is in no position to react when their imposed identity is written all over their bodies (Perrez-Torres, 1999, p. 187). The marks of the lashings on Sethe's back are interpreted differently depending on who looks at them. There are few similarities between the opinions offered by a black woman and a white man. Amy (the white woman who helped Sethe during labor, when she gave birth to Denver) sees the marks and thinks of a tree. The thinner lines look like branches while the bigger ones appear to be leaves. Baby Suggs calls the scars "roses of blood" while Paul D. says they are similar to an ironsmith's sculpture. The opinions seem to be gender-specific as well. The women, Amy and Baby Suggs, think that the marks look like a tree or like roses while Paul D. sees iron. There is also a deeper meaning. The African-American woman appears to be the ultimate other. She cannot see what has been written on her and must rely on the interpretation of others. She has no say in the matter, meaning she has no voice. She cannot write the text, thus she cannot offer her own view of her own history. The only real history for them, the history about them, has already been written by others or is in the process of being written (Henderson, 1999, p. 56-57).

Some memories were more pleasant than others. Sethe remembers how even 124 was once a house of plenty, blessed by Baby Suggs, holy. Then was the time when everyone loved them and there was balance. A different form of otherness appears here, a beneficial one. Besides offering plenty and improving the residence, Baby Suggs, holy, as she is called in the novel, also acts as an unofficial, unanointed or, better yet, self-anointed preacher. She did everything by her own power and the power of her heart which, in the face of any established religion, is a form of otherness in itself. Her preaching was in some ways similar to Christianity. She went to a clearing in a forest and began with the words: "Let the children come!" However, she took it further. She advised the children to laugh so that their mothers would see them happy. Afterwards she called the grown-up men and told them to dance and finally she called out the women and told them to cry and unburden themselves. Afterward everything started to change: the children started to dance, the men started to cry and the women started to laugh. Everyone did as they felt they should and Baby Suggs looked silently at them. Also, there were other differences between her message and Christianity, one being that she told them to have more faith in themselves and their own power and to try to achieve things on their own because if they couldn't do it, no one would do it for them (Morrison, 2004, p. 101-103).

In that place, after hearing those words, Sethe made the first step necessary in leaving the past behind. However, she also found out that it was not enough. She had only managed to claim herself yet there were two other important steps left to take: freeing oneself and claiming ownership of that freed self. Even the happy memories were darkened by older and sinister ones. Baby Suggs advised them to love themselves and especially their flesh because their masters did not. She told them to love their flesh because their masters had flayed it, to love their hands which the masters ordered them to put to work so hard and to love their mouth whose cries their masters paid no heed or attention to. After a while though, even the African-American community was against Baby Suggs. She always seemed to have enough

for everybody like she was multiplying the food. They interpreted it as excess and believed that it was too much. They started to resent her for knowing and doing so many things. They believed that she was intruding on God's power because it was Jesus who fed a crowd by multiplying bread and fish. They were annoyed by the fact that she was different from them. Baby Suggs did not even have to escape from slavery because her son bought her freedom and her master took her over the Ohio River in a wagon, gave her freedom papers, paid her resettlement fee and rented a house for her. They were furious of her because she affected their pride (Morrison, 2004, p. 111-112, 103-104, 161-162; Mark, 2002, p. 42).

In the end though even Baby Suggs gave up, grew tired and concluded all her life's experience into one thing while she was on her death bed: all bad luck came from white men who committed only excesses and did not know when to stop (Morrison, 2004, p. 122-123). The blame is placed on white masters and on slavery, the system which choked the life out of Baby Suggs and her people. This comparison between slavery and a circle of iron is also made by Denver who accuses Beloved of having choked Sethe:

"You did, I saw you," said Denver.

"What?"

"I saw your face. You made her choke."

"I didn't do it."

"You told me you loved her."

"I fixed it, didn't I? Didn't I fix her neck?"

"After. After you checked her neck."

"I kissed her neck. I didn't choke it. The circle of iron choked it." (Morrison, 2004, p. 119)

After Paul D. found out about the infanticide and confronted Sethe about it, he accused her of loving too strongly. She did all those things because her love was too thick, at which she responded that she knows no other way. "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all." (Morrison, 2004, p. 194). When confronted with hardships, difficult decisions have to be made. If not, one can only continue to wonder and ask himself why, like Paul D.

"Tell me something, Stamp." Paul D's eyes were rheumy. "Tell me this one thing. How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?"

"All he can," said Stamp Paid. "All he can."

"Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" (Morrison, 2004, p. 277).

As a conclusion for this subchapter we believe that Paul D.'s words when he came back to Sethe are self-explanatory: "(...) me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow." (Morrison, 2004, p. 322). The past belongs to them not only on a personal level, but also as a group or as a couple. That, however, is not enough. It lacks a perspective. It lacks a future. It needs some kind of tomorrow.

### **Infanticide as a Last Resort and the Character's Justification**

The act of infanticide is the strongest connection between the character Sethe and the real Margaret Garner. Her act was just one of the answers directed towards slavery. African-

American literature has dealt with the issue overtime yet the answers to the question ‘How do we deal with slavery?’ have often times been harsh. In *Clotelle*, by William Wells Brown, the answer is suicide and the chapter in which Isabella jumps into the Potomac is even entitled *Death is Freedom*. In a later novel by Zora Neale Hurston entitled *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, slavery is defined as a game where you have to die in order to win. Morrison however takes this even further, portraying slavery as something that practically forces you to kill in order to protect that which you love most. Without implying that she would ever do the deed, Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, also says that she would rather see her children dead than enslaved. Morrison decided to deal with this issue from more than one perspective and to create a multitude of voices in order to envision a larger picture and even offer a more valid analysis without clearly condemning or excusing. We live in a different time, and there is no righteousness applying a transhistorical ethic. Morrison does not mean to justify, but by using a multitude of voices she can both accuse and embrace at the same time (Rushdy, 1999, p. 44-47).

Both of Sethe’s daughters want to hear the stories about the infanticide and slavery and their motives are as divergent as their methods of making their mother offer the information. Beloved is using her mother’s guilt for killing her while Denver is utilizing her mother’s guilt for excluding her. Storytelling, then, moves from passive to active and has the power to either heal or kill. Morrison thus empowers the novel’s oral narrative with the power of folklore. Beloved needs the story in order to create for herself a memory of the facts she cannot remember while Denver needs to find out in order to have a larger view of a history from which she has been excluded because her mother wanted to keep the past away. In their own way they both need their mother’s stories, including the infanticide, so that they can define themselves and their relationship to her (Harris, 1999, p. 141).

Beloved and Denver were not the only ones who needed to hear stories in order to better define themselves, their lives or their actions. When she was little Nan told Sethe the story of her own mother, which also included infanticide. In this case it was not committed out of love or desires to protect. Even though Sethe herself did not ask to be told these stories she listened nonetheless:

“Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe”, and she did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. “She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe.” (Morrison, 2004, p. 74).

After learning from Nan the story of her mother Sethe has certain information that, after she will become a grown-up, will help her to better understand her mother and her lineage (Rushdy, 1999, p. 59). Her mother’s other children died as anonymous as Beloved and Sethe was the only one who was truly given a name because she was the result of her mother’s only unforced pregnancy. Her mother’s motivation is simply and shortly stated while Sethe’s will receive a larger scope.

In *Beloved* the infanticide scene begins in an apocalyptic manner. “When the four horsemen came – schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff – the house on Bluestone Road was so quiet they thought they were too late.” However, three of them decided to go inside while the fourth waited outside with a rifle in his hand, but only as a last resort. They came to capture, not to kill, for no profit could be obtained from a dead slave. After they looked around and made sure it was safe to go inside, they did, and were struck by what they saw. Schoolteacher (the nickname the slaves gave to the overseer from the plantation Sethe ran away) blamed everything that happened on his nephew who had beaten Sethe too hard, but the image was still shocking and they had to act fast (Morrison, 2004, p. 174-176).

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them.; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, mused and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere – in the ticking time the men spent staring at that there was to stare at – the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatcher the baby from the arc of its mother’s swing (Morrison, 2004, p. 175).

Schoolteacher’s other nephew was there and the only thing he could say was “What she go and do that for?” He was unable to understand how an African-American slave could react like that just because she had been beaten. He was also beaten a lot of times, and he was white, and he never did anything like that. For him it mattered a lot more that he was a white man and got beaten than the brutal manner in which the slave was hit. In his mind Sethe was the only one to blame for what had happened. He was not the only one that accused her or questioned her decision. Yet Sethe believed that her decision to rush in had its merit for the only place her children would really be safe in had to be somewhere out of this world (Morrison, 2004, p. 176-193). Morrison attempts to describe what was going on in Sethe’s heart:

Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, three cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and walks. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s had, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful and carried, pushed, dragged them though the veil, out, away, over there where no one would hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.” (Morrison, 2004, p. 124).

For her act Sethe received the harshest reproaches from men, including former slaves. Even though Paul D.’s attitude is not identical to that of the white slave master his disapproval is also obvious. What really struck him was not the act itself but the fact that Sethe believed she had the right or the obligation to do that because they were her children.

Her love and desire to protect them knew no bounds and this troubled him. “This here new Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him.” Even though Paul D. asked Sethe about it years after the deed was done her feelings were still there. When he told her that what she did was wrong and maybe even worse that slavery, Sethe replied that she does not deal in ‘maybe’. She did not know what death was like yet she knew slavery and knew schoolteacher. That was what she was trying to prevent from happening. Paul D.’s final point, though, was that what she did was not even human. “You got too feet, Sethe, not four, (...)” (Morrison, 2004, p. 193-194). The claim which he is so afraid of can be analyzed from a multitude of perspectives. Schoolteacher, for one, believed he had the right to claim them because he was empowered to take slaves back to his domain by the Fugitive Slave Act. When Sethe mentioned the fact that she wanted to protect her children by putting them “on the other side” that too can be understood in two ways. The less violent one was Ohio as a free state, on the other side of the demarcation line between free states and slave states. The second and more drastic meaning was infanticide. By killing her child she placed her on the ultimate ‘other side’, death, outside the reach of the white man’s domain. Through love she claimed for herself the right to act that way, an action toward which Baby Suggs was in the end neutral, neither approving nor condemning (Askeland, 1999, p. 171). She knew that Sethe saw her action as inevitable, a feeling which Morrison managed to render for the reader as well. Only schoolteacher and his nephew ask themselves ‘What she go and do that for?’ The community from the novel has no need to. The only question they have is whether she had the right (Furman, 1996, p. 69). If there is any approval for Sethe’s act, it comes from slave women alone. Even they, though, did not offer support from the beginning. Denver also needed a long time to understand her mother’s past. With *Beloved* close to her Sethe’s guilt became more and more obvious until Denver decided to do something about it. “Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and *Beloved*: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw. *Beloved* was making her pay for it.” Denver’s decision is to protect her mother. In order to do that she must go and ask for help. The news of what was going on at 124 spread for days. Initially the women were reluctant to help but Ella convinced them otherwise. She knew what Sethe had been through and disapproved more of the ghost than of Sethe’s past. A ghost made flesh should not have the right to invade the world of the living. Shacking things in the night, out of nowhere, was acceptable, but a physical specter was just too much. Ella had sympathy for she too had a dark past. While in puberty she was shared by both father and son. When Ella was arguing on Sethe’s side she said that no one deserved the kind of life Sethe had. Ella concluded that even though Sethe was not even close to innocent, children are not supposed to come back from the grave and kill their mother even if she was the one who killed them. This sort of misguided justice was simply wrong. “What’s fair ain’t necessarily right”, Ella said. (Morrison, 2004, p. 295-302).

Ella’s motivation had everything to do with leaving the past behind. Because of her desire to keep the past at bay Ella is the one who freed herself and offered the same possibility to Sethe. She convinces the other women to join her and together they exorcise the ghost of *Beloved* not through a personal desire but by an act of community.



To conclude, the act of infanticide was uncommon but not unique among slaves. However, it was often covered up so as not to damage the ideal of the African-American mother because her image was always that of a strong resilient woman with a tender form of love for her children (Christian, 1992, p. 213). Yet Morrison was not a writer that would conform to imaginary ideals and stereotypes. Sometimes she would even leave the laws of physics behind when constructing her novels yet this only increased the appeal of her writings in the eyes of readers. “They even may have been captivated by her prose spells and the worlds she created just for them: worlds where ancestors fly, where slain baby girls return as fully grown ghost-women, and where books talk.” (Griffin, 2009, p. 993). This novel is even more so a revisionist construction which Morrison deals with from many angles, the strongest of which is *Beloved*, ‘the incarnated memory of Sethe’s guilt’ and “A symbol of unrelenting criticism of the dehumanizing function of the institution of slavery”. Still, the image is not complete for *Beloved* is only half of the big picture, the accusing side. The other half is represented by the desire to remember and the need to pass on which appear in the character of Denver. This duality manifests itself throughout the novel and in Morrison’s ambivalent view, both unforgiving and loving in the same time, each side represented by one daughter (Rushdy, 1999, p. 47-53). Toward the end, though, it is the loving side that will take the upper hand. In the end we can say that *Beloved* was inspired by history. It has truth in it yet it reaches its highest achievement by rewriting the past, by relating it in some parts and transcending it in others. By moving beyond written history it also manages to bring forth not only what was mentioned but also what was hidden, regardless of the harshness of the detail. The novel shatters the veil of things too terrible to relate. It serves its purpose as a memento for the victims of slavery by expressing not only the speakable and the unspeakable, but also the unspoken.

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