

A Web Case Book on BELOVED by Toni Morrison

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Who was Beloved?

by
Joel Booster

“I AM BELOVED and she is mine.”

-Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

“You think she was sure enough YOUR sister?

What if that girl was sure enough not a girl, but something more?”

-Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

These two passages from the novel *Beloved* both describe in some way the book's title character. Who was Beloved? Was she the allegorical bride of vengeful love to her mother, or was she the reflection of past pain and hardship to a community of former slaves? These questions are both answered and not answered numerous times throughout the text. It seems as though Morrison, through her quest to explore the lives and experiences of the freed slave, mis-stepped in her narrative, leaving the reader without a clear picture of who or what Beloved is supposed to be. The ambiguity of such a question is neither addressed, nor accepted by Morrison in her book. Because of the disjointed amount of narrative and first person descriptions of Beloved and her effects on the family and community to which she set upon, Morrison does not allow for any clear answers to be built up, because she herself tears them down. We hear from Beloved that she is Sethe's. We see through the eyes of the narrator that Beloved is neither Sethe's, nor anyone else's—merely a ghostly manifestation of pain that is associated with Sethe, but effecting everyone else as well. Whether manifesting the psychological frustrations of Denver, or the merely the emotional repository for an entire community of former slaves, it is both clear and unclear that Beloved's influence reaches far beyond the property lines of 124. In Lynda Khoolish's article “To Be Loved and Cry Shame,” She summarizes this

thesis quite accurately when she stated, “Morrison makes the question of who Beloved is so ambiguous that the characters as well as the readers of the novel are frequently confused as to Beloved’s identity” (171). Through this ambiguity, Morrison added to the mystique of the character overall, but weakened the effectiveness of Beloved as a character through her inability to paint a clear picture of what her presence was meant to be.

One could argue quite clearly, that Beloved’s purpose in the novel has to do solely with her relationship with her mother Sethe. The most valid argument has to do with the fact that Beloved’s presence in the novel has everything to do with the actions that Sethe took when Beloved was a baby. Obviously, if Sethe had not murdered Beloved when she was a child, Beloved would not be present now in ghost like form. There are numerous images throughout the novel that speak about Beloved needing only Sethe, and no one else, “licking up devotion from Sethe like a starving dog” (Morrison, 287). Passages such as these speak not only to Beloved’s need emotionally, but Morrison goes on in passages such as these to describe how Beloved literally seems to be sapping physical energy away from her mother. “As Beloved grew fatter with every passing day, so too did Sethe grow thinner... Giving up every ounce of food and energy she had to keep Beloved happy.” (Morrison 290). No where in the novel does it describe this effect of Beloved on anyone else, nor does anyone else observe an ounce of the “hunger in her eyes” while looking at anyone but Sethe.

However, this lack of hunger could speak about the effects that absence has on other individuals throughout the story. Paul D describes a distinct uneasy feeling while observing this same hunger in Beloved’s eyes when she looked on Sethe (Morrison 143). In her article, Mary Carden suggests that because Paul D notices such a hunger in Beloved’s eyes, Beloved serves as a mirror to his own desires, deeper than he is willing to acknowledge at this point (414). This fixation of Beloved on Sethe makes it seem as though Sethe is the only important factor in her life, and that perhaps Sethe and Beloved are the only important characters in the novel, however by examining how their actions towards each other effects the other accessory characters in the story, Beloved’s function in the novel becomes unclear. Is it to simply further Sethe’s character by embodying the love that she attempted to save by murdering her child, or does Beloved represent something much deeper? By reflecting back at Paul D his own emotions, Beloved could perhaps serve as a mirror for the entire community of former slaves, reflecting back the desires that they so desperately suppress, because they themselves have sacrificed those same desires because they wanted to keep them away from their own personal “school teacher” (Koolish, 185).

Reginald Watson describes this kind of “physical and emotional milking” as Morrison’s way of manifesting both the guilt and burden of Sethe, and the willingness of Sethe to give herself over to such a burden as “the natural sacrificial bond which occurs between a mother and a child starting from morning sickness until the weaning process” (Watson 161). The bond of mother and daughter that Sethe and Beloved shared is stressed upon countless times throughout this novel, and speaks to perhaps what could be Beloved’s main purpose in the novel, a physical manifestation of a mother’s grief and love. Beloved

returns, and suddenly Sethe's attention is turned to nothing but her, and her needs. Her motherly instincts, combined with the guilt over her own role in her daughter's murder immediately kicks in, and she can do nothing but "explain away her own actions, and throw herself over Beloved in the most embarrassing way." (Morrison 296). Beloved, in this way isolates herself from not only from Denver, but the entire community. "By emphasizing the mother-daughter bond between [Beloved and Sethe] the novel seemingly forces away the importance of setting, character, and history in much the same manner that Beloved ultimately forces Paul D from the house" (Watson 173). The dynamic of their familial relationship ultimately forces the focus to be centered on Beloved and Sethe as mother and daughter. This dynamic focuses little on Denver, Paul D, or the African-American slave community at all.

Throughout the novel however, the mother and daughter relationship is only emphasized through someone else's explanation. Through Denver's own narratives of what their relationship meant to her, is the only gateway we have into what their relationship was actually like. "By having Denver be the one to explain the latter part (the destruction part) of Beloved and Sethe's relationship, Morrison creates the 'other sight' of the youngest daughter" (Watson, 162). By creating this other sight, the reader cannot fully understand the complexity of what was going on in the house near the end of the novel. While there is no reason to suggest that perhaps Denver's narrative is less reliable than the other's in the book, it is plausible to suggest that Beloved appears only to represent "the jealous love that absence creates when a mother surreptitiously detaches the love that is placed on one child, and refocuses it onto another, (what the displaced child will feel is the) more favorable child" (Watson, 161). In this way, Beloved's purpose in the novel ceases to have anything to do with the relationship that she shares with Sethe, but rather exists to contrast for the reader the relationship of Sethe and Denver, with that of the newly found Beloved and Sethe. Beloved in a similar way contrasts Sethe's relationships with every character in the novel.

In an article for MELUS, Peggy Ochoa not only asserts that Morrison utilized the Biblical book of Song of Solomon, and "revised it to inform the relationships between Morrison's characters... Specifically the relationship between Beloved and her mother Sethe" (Ochoa 107). Ochoa specifically makes the case that Beloved represents the Old Testament bride described throughout the various poems in Song of Solomon. Just as the need for love seemingly pulled Beloved back from the grave to her mother's side, "the pain of separation from one who is object of overwhelming love is an integral part of the Biblical text" (Ochoa 115). Beloved, similarly to the bride of Solomon in the Bible, laments the separation that forces her away from her mother's (or lover's) side. Sethe, on the flip side of the equation could easily be seen as the object of love in that she abandoned Beloved in her time of need, just as in the biblical passage: "I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself and was gone" (Song of Solomon, 5:6). Beloved, in this reading of the text, exists to embody the painful longing that results from abandonment. By looking at these two women as the allegorical manifestations of the lovers in the Biblical text, the relationship between Beloved and Sethe becomes paramount, and all other relationships throughout the novel cease to become anything more than distractions to the story at hand. Beloved in this sense, represents what Ochoa

calls “[Sethe’s] painful past... the abandoned portion of that past” (Ochoa 116). By putting such an emphasis on Beloved and Sethe’s relationship, Morrison seems to be talking about the power of love, and its ability to transcend the grave in Beloved’s case. The bond between these two women transcends history and culture, and the community in which they live. By focusing on the importance of the relationship between Sethe and Beloved, allegorizing them as the biblical lovers, Morrison makes a distinct comparison between the biblical passage “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Song of Solomon, 6:3) and Beloved’s statement “I AM BELOVED and she is mine” (Morrison, 214). In this way it becomes obvious that Beloved’s purpose in the novel is all about Sethe, and has little or nothing to do with the hardships of the community in which she appears.

While the allegorical relationship between Sethe and Beloved makes a strong case for the importance of Beloved and Sethe’s relationship, and her existing as an image of jealous loving rage, the evidence to suggest such a relationship between the two does not exist within the text. Even Ochoa who attempted to make the case herself admits that “Although Beloved physically resembles Solomon’s beloved more than Sethe does, the circumstances of Sethe’s life and her time as a bride more closely parallel that of the biblical counterpart” (Ochoa, 119). In this way, Beloved does not have any place in the novel as an image of much else but the catalyst of what the events that propel Sethe and Denver out of their house, and change their lives forever. In fact, because of Beloved’s absence by the end of the story, the comparison to the Biblical couple cannot be made, as the latter couple is defined less so by the journey of their relationship, but the ultimate end—their bond being made permanent, never changing and forever strong. Without this bond, without this ending dynamic, Beloved cannot be added into this equation, but rather the people who end the book bonded and permanent must be considered the bride and groom. In this way, Morrison, in keeping with the biblical allusion makes the case that the Sethe (and indeed, all of the former slaves) and her memories are all that are left to be bonded together (Ochoa, 126). By the end of the novel, Beloved is merely one in a large grouping of painful memories that exists to physically and emotionally torment those who still live to be effected by them. Marginalized by her ultimately anticlimactic end, the focus is taken off of the Sethe/Beloved relationship, and instead put on the former slaves’ relationship to their life now, as opposed to what they left behind, and how they reconcile those differences.

Beloved herself claims that she is Sethe’s. Or rather, she says that “she” is mine (Morrison, 214). However the reader is left unsure of whom exactly Beloved is talking about. We are to assume that Beloved is speaking about Sethe, however this assumption is based off of in equal parts what the reader does know, and what the reader does not know. The “she” in this passage could be an informal “she,” referring to the woman race as a whole. Beloved could be claiming the womanhood that she never had a chance to live out in her original life. When she was murdered as an infant, Beloved had no chance to experience the womanhood that is afforded to Denver, her younger sister. Returned now, as a ghostly presence in the house, she is neither able to live out her life as a woman, or a true “she.” The text here builds the case that Beloved is fixated on Sethe, but it could also be said that Beloved is instead fixated on the idea of womanhood in general.

In this same passage, Beloved expresses “the inability to separate herself from her mother... her identity becomes unclear, even to herself” (Koolish, 176). In this way, Beloved represents the sexuality that is not able to come forth because of the abandonment at a young age by Sethe. According to Koolish, in this way Beloved cannot represent anything to do with Sethe alone, for she represents the psychological displacement of all African American slave girls of that period (Koolish, 187). However, the text simply says “She is mine,” and goes on further to talk about the displacement from her mother, who in this section is the only individual called “She.” In this way, Sethe could both be representative of Beloved’s loss, and her confusion. “I AM BELOVED, and she is mine” could be talking about Sethe’s identity, or her womanhood in general. Returning, and not being able to have lived out her life, but rather skipping ahead into womanhood, caused the displacement of identity and therefore Beloved became a mirror of what her own actions caused. In this way, Beloved becomes a reflection of *Sethe*’s own actions, and is not meant to represent the reflection of anyone but Sethe.

To say that Beloved represents only something to Sethe in the novel, ignores the text that supports her affect on every other character throughout the story. Baby Suggs, for instance, who never knew Beloved as anything but a “crawling, already? Child” (Morrison, 41). Baby Suggs it seemed only to want to watch the colors and gave up much of what she loved about her life because of the death of Beloved. While it was less about the actual death of her grandchild, and more about the act of murder that was committed by her daughter, the effects on Baby Suggs psyche were numerous. “Beloved’s presence exceeds both time and her physical life, as she went on affecting everyone who stumbled onto that house from her death on” (Koolish, 174). Her presence not only affected individuals after her original death, but upon her return, she found ways in which to profoundly touch the lives of not only Sethe, but Paul D and Denver as well. In Paul D’s case, Beloved forces him from the house, into the cold of storage shed, all the while loosening the rust on the “tin can” in which he kept his deepest secrets. Driven by her desire to have Sethe all to herself, Beloved succeeded in not only breaking down a bond between two individuals, but also in breaking down the spirit of an emotionally hardened slave. Beloved, similarly forced an immense change in Denver as well. No longer afraid to leave the house, Denver ventures out on her own to find work and support her mother. Denver clearly makes the largest shift in character as she not only moves from an introverted, emotionally lonely individual, to an empowered vision of new generation African-American woman (Shulman, 301). The entire community as well is affected, as for the first time in over a decade the women of the community gather outside the property of 124 to oust the demon that has plagued one of their own. Beloved in this way is a unifying force. Where once she served the purpose of disjoining the rest of the household, by the novel’s end, she ultimately unifies an entire grouping of people.

In the end, Beloved cannot merely be categorized as Sethe’s alone. Although Beloved herself claims that Sethe is “hers and hers alone” (Morrison, 210), there is also text that supports the idea that Beloved exists as an “emotional repository” for the community that birthed her (Koolish, 170). But while the evidence suggests otherwise, Morrison’s ultimate purpose in creating the character of Beloved cannot be proved or disproved

through textual support alone. The author herself encourages readers to “arrive at readings which may or may not coincide with those intended by the author” (Morrison, 29). However, while this goal is an admirable one to be sure, how can one accurately prescribe an image, idea or thesis to the ultimately ambiguous character of *Beloved*? Whether a manifestation of the collision between one character’s love and guilt, or a reflection of what the buried pain and anguish that an entire community feels after centuries of repression, *Beloved* can only exist outside of both of these ideas—a mere catalyst for events that ultimately define both Sethe as a character and the post emancipated African American community.

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