

A Web Case Book on BELOVED by Toni Morrison

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Two Decades of Terrible Twos: A Psychoanalytical Analysis of Beloved

by Aubrie Cox

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a slave narrative of a feat not uncommon to the times: a mother killing her own child to keep her from the horrors of enslavement. In *Beloved*, however, the child returns. First, she, only known as "Beloved," is a ghost haunting the house where her mother and sister live. Then, when exorcised from the home, she returns in corporeal form the age she would have been had she lived. In the beginning of the novel, the two-year-old ghost's presence is referred to as "spiteful" (Morrison 3), "sad," and mistakenly "evil" (10). Although Beloved is in the body of a twenty year old, her mentality is still that of a toddler, but rapidly developing. At the same time, because of her physical appearance, Beloved is subconsciously trying to develop on many levels at once. She is a child who was violently separated from her mother, by her mother, far before she was ready.

Beloved is separated from her mother not only by death but also by the barrier between the spiritual and physical realms. She haunts the house 124 as a toddler would throw a tantrum. At two years of age, a child is typically learning to express him or herself clearly. The child is developing the communication skills that will allow him or her to interact with other people, and while the child knows what he or she is trying to say, others may not. A two year old will likely start with two-word sentences, then possibly moving on to six-word sentences within the following year (most of Beloved's first soliloquy is a mesh of two to five-word phrases with the occasional longer narrative). When the child finds his or her current abilities are not enough to properly communicate with others, the child will grow frustrated. Having no other way to express him or herself efficiently, the child will have a temper tantrum ("2 year old").

In the beginning of the novel, Beloved has few ways of communicating with the living world. The quickest way she finds to express herself is by moving household items. When frustrated and angry, she begins to throw objects, and being a spirit, has a greater

capacity to throw than a toddler constrained by corporeal form. Newfound strength is not unusual for a child of two years. Because he or she is growing and changing from the body of a baby to that of a child, the “child is also stronger, which means his outbursts will be more violent” (“2 year old”). Beloved’s actions are of a larger scale, but follow the typical two year old response to frustration: “. . . the baby’s spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye, so hard he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue” (Morrison 14). Sethe wonders, “Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage?” (5), but the baby is not determined to hurt the dog; Here Boy was merely the first object she could obtain at the time, and she used him to express her anger and frustration at being separated from her mother and being unable to communicate with the rest of the household. The greater Beloved’s anger, the more impressive her tantrums become: “It took him a while to realize that his legs were not shaking because of worry, but because the floorboards were and the grinding, shoving floor was only part of it. The house itself was pitching” (Morrison 21). Later in the novel, it becomes more apparent that this action may not have been only out of anger for a lack of communication, but also because someone else was receiving her mother’s attention, something she herself desperately wants. It is the result of the “toddler’s struggle to take control of his actions, impulses and feelings” (“2 year old”).

After Beloved’s house-shaking tantrum, Paul D exorcises Beloved from the house. The next time Beloved appears, she is in corporeal form just outside the house. With her “new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands” (Morrison 61) and “her soft new feet” that are “barely capable of their job” (65), Beloved develops from birth all over again despite her adult appearance. Even after she has gone past days of laying in bed like a helpless baby, Beloved still has an infant’s conception of existence as “every afternoon she doubted anew the older woman’s return” (68). This doubt is a possible sign of separation anxiety, which she has probably been suffering from since her murder.

Toddlers with separation anxiety:

...become upset when parents leave for a short time, such as going out to dinner. The child may cry, plead for them not to leave, and try to prevent their departure. Although distressing, this normal behavior is a cue that the child is able to distinguish parents from other adults and is aware of the possibility they may not return. (Huberty)

Later in the novel, Beloved clings to Sethe to the point that she completely takes over the woman and keeps her to herself within the house. Beloved “cannot lose her again” (Morrison 250), because each separation has been too much for her to bear. The separations were obviously traumatizing as she remembers each time clearly, despite her age at the time: “Three times I lost her: once with the flowers because of the noisy clouds of smoke; once when she went into the sea instead of smiling at me; once under the bridge when I went to join her” (Morrison 253). The fear of losing Sethe again is the driving force for Beloved to join with her mother so that it will be impossible for them to separate again.

Some of Beloved’s toddler traits never dissipate, such as the fact that a two year olds “world is still primarily ‘me’ centered” (“2 year old”); Beloved takes full control of her

world, which consists of only 124. Once Beloved is on her feet again, she displays of the curiosity of a toddler who is “much more interested now in imitating other people’s mannerisms and activities” (“2 year old”). While Beloved does not completely imitate Sethe’s actions, she does closely observe her and shows further signs of separation anxiety:

Like a familiar, she hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to. She rose early in the dark to be there, waiting, in the kitchen when Sethe came down to make bread before she left for work. In lamplight, and over the flames of the cooking stove, their shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords. She was in the window at two when Sethe returned, or the doorway; then the porch, its steps, the path, the road, till finally, surrendering to the habit, Beloved began inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124. (69)

This process slowly leads into Beloved’s need to join with her mother, a desire she seems to have had from the beginning, but which is not revealed outright until later in the novel during both her soliloquies that begins with, “I am Beloved and she is mine” (Morrison 248). In her first soliloquy she also says, “the woman is there with the face I want” (249). It is here that Beloved begins to attempt to develop psychologically in multiple stages at once, which is why “Beloved is repeatedly described as fragmented, split off, shattered” (Koolish); but, “Beloved has knowledge of the splitting self” (Koolish). She is so aware of it that she even begins to feel that she is physically affected by the stress: “When her tooth came out—an odd fragment, last in the row—she thought it was starting” (Morrison 157).

One reason for Beloved’s developmental problems is the fact that the only father figure is driven out of the house. According to Freudian psychology: “There is no question that heterosexual orientation is a major outcome of the oedipal period for most girls, and that the traditional psychoanalytical account of the development of female sexuality, and growth of the girl’s relationship to her father describes this” (Chodorow). Psychologists Maccoby and Jacklin concluded from the Goodenough study that fathers enjoy some level of flirtation from their daughters (Chodorow). Since Beloved’s father is not present when she returns in corporeal form, Beloved seeks out her mother’s current lover, Paul D. She places the title of “father” upon him and tries to use him to complete the transition from the preoedipal to the oedipal period which her physical age (regardless of her mental age) is urging her to make. However, not only does Paul D not care for the girl, he strongly rejects her and ignores whatever subconscious desires he may feel for the young woman. While “a girl does not give up this preoedipal relationship completely, but rather builds whatever happens later upon this preoedipal base” (Chodorow), Paul D’s rejection does hinder Beloved’s development. A father may outwardly reject his daughter’s movements toward him but inwardly not disapprove of them. Paul D rejects her outwardly and inwardly, thus Beloved does not complete the transition to the oedipal stage.

Beloved then concentrates all her attention, once again, on Sethe. In doing so, she reverts

back to the preoedipal stage:

Freud's characterization of the girl's preoedipal connection to her mother as "attachment," emphasizes this persistence, by pointing to dual nature of attachment: a girl actively attaches herself, and chooses her attachment, to her mother, and at the same time is passively, and not as a matter of choice, attached--an appendage or extension. (Chodorow)

Beloved believes, "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop" (Morrison 248). The girl has clearly attached herself to Sethe, so strongly that she wants to be unified with her mother as a single "hot thing" (248), which would be a living being. Beloved focuses on these preoedipal predicates, ignoring the reality that Sethe has a separate identity from Beloved. Her determination is to completely join with her mother. Because Paul D is eventually driven out of the home, and her father is not present, Beloved never has a father figure to which she can compare Sethe to view as a place of refuge and freedom from her mother as girls do as they grow older (Chodorow), which is a part of the oedipal stage she attempted to transit into because of her physical state.

Her inability to forgo her development could possibly be due to the African cultural aspects woven into the novel on which Teresa N. Washington focused in her essay "The Mother-Daughter *Àjé* Relationships in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." African women in Yoruba society are thought to have inherited a spiritual force known as *Àjé*. This force "can be genetically passed from mother to child" (Washington) and may be a subconscious cultural mindset in the minds of both Sethe and Beloved. Because it also tends to force out the father figure and focus on the bond between mother and daughter (Washington), it further stifles Beloved's psychological development since she cannot proceed past the preoedipal stage. Preoedipal characteristics stay with the daughter as she grows, but she does seek to have a sense of individuality from her mother (Chodorow). Beloved desires no such thing; instead, she wants to completely join with her mother, like in an *Àjé* relationship: "Rather than illuminating the singular self, a mirrored unity is revealed, and the mother and daughter witness the singularity of their indivisible selves and their material and spiritual forms" (Washington). Beloved's goal is for her and Sethe to be joined as one; however, as a typical toddler, her emotions are raging. She still suffers from separation anxiety and emotional distress from her own death (and from the fact that it was by Sethe's hands).

Beloved felt her mother's protectiveness when she was originally alive. Sethe was determined to keep her daughter safe and deliver the milk Beloved needed. In a way, it is similar to "the mother's tutorials on spiritual expansion, that are also promises of shared power" (Washington). However, after Sethe kills Beloved to prevent her from being taken into slavery and to put her somewhere where she would be safe, Beloved "vacillates between rapturous awe of her mother and pathological desire to destroy her" (Washington). Beloved may not want to completely destroy Sethe, but she does wish to strip Sethe of any individuality she may possess, or, as Washington states, "she wants the two of them to 'join' and return fully unified to the 'other side.'" In the world of the living, while Beloved can trap Sethe in 124, other people such as Paul D and Denver lurk on the edges of Beloved's corporeal world and are a threat to her claim over Sethe. Death is an eternal realm where Beloved and Sethe can be forever one. Underneath the desire to

be one is also the need to kill her mother as her mother did her—“she took my face away” (Morrison 251)—possibly even for the same reason that Sethe killed Beloved, which was to protect and free her. In her soliloquy, Beloved says, “If I had the teeth of the man who died on my face I would bite the circle around her neck” (Morrison 249), the circle being that of iron or a binding force that enslaves Sethe physically and/or mentally.

Once Beloved obtains a physical form, she seems convinced that mentally she and Sethe are already one; Beloved only needs for she and Sethe to be joined physically, which is trivial should she succeed in killing Sethe, for Beloved could join her in the world of the dead where the two spirits would no longer be restricted and separated by corporeal form. Until that time comes, Beloved draws Sethe into the house and keeps Sethe under her complete control, and that is where her toddler emotions escalate to full power once again.

Toddlers are “emotionally fragile,” even if inquisitive creatures, they can be “laughing one minute, crying the next, often for no apparent reason” (“2 year old”). Beloved goes from playing and demanding things of Sethe to arguing with her whenever the mood hits her. She shows little concern for Sethe’s feelings, Sethe’s pleas for forgiveness, or her rationalizations for killing her daughter. In the end, however, Lynda Koolish states: “If Sethe were accurately responding to Beloved’s emotions, Beloved’s censure, fear, anger, and sense of betrayal over Sethe’s killing her would have more catexis for Beloved than her feelings of abandonment.” This, again, reveals Beloved’s separation anxiety. She cannot bear being alone and longs for her mother’s constant attention, body, and soul. Beloved literally begins to drain the life out of Sethe as she herself grows larger and her mother shrinks. The fact that Sethe succumbs to her only encourages Beloved to continue her actions.

When the women of the town gather in front of the house in order to liberate Sethe, and Beloved and Sethe come onto the porch, Beloved appears confident in her hold on Sethe because Sethe reaches for her hand. They have not left the realm of 124. It is not until Sethe lets go of Beloved’s hand and leaves the porch that Beloved realizes what is happening. Sethe leaves Beloved and 124 and ventures into the world: “But now her hand is empty. Sethe is running away from her, running, and she feels the emptiness in her hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again” (Morrison 309). Beloved is stricken once again with separation anxiety and the repeated trauma is too much for the girl to handle. Earlier in the novel, “She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed” (Morrison 157), and when her worst fear comes true—Sethe abandons her again, negating any unifying transformation—her dreams also come true. “Disappeared, some say, exploded right before their eyes” (Morrison 310). The trauma is so taxing on her body that she actualizes the more violent dream she believed would happen—exploding—should Sethe abandon her again.

Through Beloved’s unstable emotions, Morrison personifies the psychological state of younger slaves. Many tales are untold concerning slavery because slaves themselves were often unable to record their stories due to their illiteracy and desire to forget. Infants and

toddlers already have trouble communicating because of their developmental stage; it is impossible to imagine what life for them was like, because they were unable to communicate how they felt. They were too young to have been put to work, but not too young to have suffered the atrocities of slavery, including the ultimate end that is death. It is also difficult to grasp what a young child would think if he or she were able to communicate after death on the subject of how he or she felt about his or her mother ending the child's life. It is too young of an age to fully grasp the concept of death—"Not until the age 4½ are these ideas more fully understood" (Norris-Shortle)-which is why Beloved is mainly concerned with the fact that Sethe abandoned her. "Separation anxiety has an immediate relation to grief and mourning" (Norris-Shortle). While the grief would be over Beloved's own death, she also grieves over the separation from her mother. "Toddlers are not yet capable of grasping the more abstract notions of death and grief, such as permanency or universality" (Norris-Shortle), so it is appropriate that Beloved would not move on after death, and even that she would return to the corporeal world, since she would not understand that death is permanent.

Morrison expands Beloved's development as a toddler to a grander scale (such as the baby ghost shaking the entire house) to help the reader better understand what it may have been like for those at an early age who were born into slavery. She takes into account the relationship of Beloved with her mother, the lack of a relationship with her father, traditional cultural beliefs of unity, and normal toddler development and intricately weaves them into one person. At one point, Paul D asks the character Stamp Paid, "How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?" (Morrison 277). Morrison does not directly address this question aside from Stamp Paid's, "All he can" (277), but she does provide a scenario of how much he or she could take before one cracks and self-destructs. And although Beloved is a supernatural phenomenon, Morrison gives her a sense of normalcy by incorporating normal toddler development so that she can not only properly represent the younger slaves, but demonstrate Beloved's humanity even after crossing over into the supernatural world. In the end, all of Beloved's wrath and power turned out to be no more than a child's separation anxiety and a tantrum to be heard, understood, and reunited with her mother.

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