

A Web Case Book on BELOVED by Toni Morrison

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When a Man Becomes a Woman (And Vice Versa)

by Kerry Dueker

Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, tells the story of one family, but represents the "60 million and more" to whom the book is dedicated. Sethe and Paul D in particular demonstrate the horrific results of human bondage in disturbingly detailed ways. Although only Sethe bears the physical disfigurement of her beating, both characters carry internal scars that serve as bitter reminders of their time at Sweet Home. Those defacements have twisted both of their personalities and made them into people they were not meant to be. For both characters, this means different things. In Paul D's case, slavery has emasculated him, effectively stealing his manhood by forbidding him to make decisions or exist for himself. Conversely, Sethe's experiences take away her femininity and typically maternal sensibilities, causing her to adapt conventionally masculine traits in order to ensure hers and her family's survival. Both characters effectively take on the stereotypical characteristics of the opposite gender as a result of their former servitude.

It seems prudent to note here that this paper is in no way trying to suppose that all men behave in a certain way and that the same goes for women. Suggesting as much would be so ludicrous that a proper analogy does not seem to exist. Nonetheless, the novel *Beloved* seems to dwell on conventional definitions of what it means to be a man and a woman through both of the aforementioned characters. Due to the fact that they consistently violate their own viewpoints, this phenomenon becomes worthy of study. Thus, it is necessary to examine these characters through their own lenses of masculinity and femininity/maternity, how they fall short of their own standards, and why they deviate from their own views so often within the text.

In line with custom these characters could possibly agree with, one must first consider the issue of Paul D. In spite of the fact that Garner referred to his slaves as men while he was alive, slavery emasculated Paul D when he realized the fluidity of this title. At first, it seemed he was only considered a man if a white man assigned him the title; he could not be a man based on his own merits, particularly in a "society [that] ordinarily classified enslaved Black men as either animals or perpetual children" (Mitchell 92). As a result of this revelation, throughout the book,

Paul D dwells on what it means to be a man. Moreover, as Deborah Ayer (Sitter) states in her article “The Making of a Man: Dialogic Meaning in *Beloved*,” “Morrison dramatizes Paul D’s enslavement to an ideal of manhood that distorts his images of self and others” (191). Thus, Paul D is not only enslaved by white men, he is enslaved by himself and his own ideas on masculinity. Even though he associates freedom with the opportunity to be a real man, he chains himself to the idea, granting it ownership over him. Through his ruminations and experiences, Paul D is shown to have decided upon three basic criteria. In his mind, a man is not meant to show emotion, a man is meant to protect the woman, and a man is meant to have final say in a household. However, even as Paul D defines manhood with these standards, he fails to live up to it. He even goes so far as to display many characteristics which are typically considered to be relegated to the female.

Typically, women are thought of to be the more emotional sex; they are the hysterical ones while men remain rational. However, there is absolutely nothing rational about slavery or the feelings it stirs up. Therefore, Paul D has little choice but to bottle up his memories and the emotions relating to his experiences. He has sealed them up tightly, his heart encased in a symbolic rusted tin, and he feels that no one will be able to pry it open, although this is later proven false. Nevertheless, Paul D does not seem to be the masculine paragon of stoicism and rational thought he intends to be. In fact, he refers to himself as “the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry” (Morrison 20). Paul D must evoke a sympathetic presence in order for this to be true. After all, there is no reason for a woman like Sethe to pour her heart out to a cold boulder of a man. Paul D has to earn a recitation of her rape by being capable of empathy. Even though he appears not to understand the truth depth of what happened to Sethe, focusing on the beating rather than the stolen milk, he is emotional enough in Sethe’s eyes to hear the story in the first place. Interestingly, while this passage reveals that Paul D is not possessed with this particular masculine trait, it also reveals some chauvinism on his part. The very fact that he is able to make so many women cry suggests that he believes that women are naturally predisposed to weeping; he just possesses the ability to bring it out of them. Apparently, he does not have the ability to make men cry because men simply do not cry from Paul D’s perspective.

Secondly, Paul D feels that a man must in some capacity act as the proverbial knight on a white horse riding in to save the day for the women. This cannot be illustrated more clearly than when he expels the baby’s spirit from the house. Upon entering the house, he sensed something wrong with it; he was deeply disturbed while crossing the threshold with “a wave of grief soak[ing] through him so thoroughly he wanted to cry... [but] he made it – dry-eyed and lucky” (Morrison 11). The very house has become an affront to his masculinity by threatening to make him weep. He feels he must retaliate by using a very masculine kind of exorcism, beating the walls and yelling in order to drive the baby girl out. He has not been in the house ten minutes before he feels the need to exact his authority over the situation and rid the house of the ghost. He did not bother to ask Sethe if she wanted the baby gone. It was her child after all; if later events are any indication, Sethe was perfectly happy having the girl remain in the house. But Paul D has been insulted, and, in his mind, Sethe and her daughter have been placed in danger. Ergo, he, as the man, is the only one who can do something about it. Afterwards, Paul D feels, at least for the time being, that he has championed his manhood sufficiently.

However, Trudier Harris raises an interesting consideration in her essay “*Beloved: ‘Woman, Thy Name Is Demon.’*” Harris claims that Paul D is “lulled into a false sense of victory” and that the exorcism was actually anything but (130). She propositions that an alternative reading would suggest that he failed to rid 124 of the baby, but that the child decided that it was time to assume a physical form. Therefore, he did not succeed in exorcising the spirit or in making life easier for the women; he actually made it more difficult by being the catalyst for Beloved’s final transformation, one that is far more treacherous than her the child-like poltergeist pitching fits every once in a while. In fact, he may have inadvertently brought about the demon that is Beloved, a woman-thing who asserted her power over him, emasculating him as effectively and painfully as slavery did. Thus, he fails in saving the women to whom he feels obligated, an act that once again strips him of his power as a man, although this time without his explicit knowledge.

Finally, Paul D cannot present himself as the head of any household because he has not been able to settle down long enough to actually develop a home life. He describes himself as a “walking man,” unable to stay put in one spot for longer than a few weeks or even days (Morrison 55). As Mary Paniccia Carden asserts in her essay “Models of Memory and Romance: The Dual Endings of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” “black men, as travelers... had no... foundation [as the patriarchal figure in a family] on which to base identity” (404). In other words, it is impossible for Paul D to fulfill his own observations of what it means to be a man and consequently a father figure if he refuses to stay in one place. He does make an attempt with Sethe by asking her to have a baby with him. Although the proposition is primarily motivated by his guilt after having sex with Beloved, Paul D is attempting to assert his masculinity by becoming a true father as opposed to the surrogate he has forced himself to become. Neither of the girls has accepted Paul D’s overtures, viewing him as an invader upon their ideal family life, so he has little hope on that front. Moreover, slavery emasculated him once, and Beloved has managed to do it once more in the bedroom. Having a baby with Sethe is the only way Paul D can think to establish his position as “the man of the house.” Furthermore, Paul D is attempting to assert some control on his own life. He is clearly out of his depth with Beloved; one way or another, she manages to hold him under her sway. Paul D does not relish in his loss of power, and he knows he will not be able to take it back from her. Thus, he does the next best thing by trying to have some dominance over Sethe, the figure Beloved desires and the one who is in total control of the household. However, this attempt, like his others, fails when he discovers that perhaps Sethe is more masculine than he will ever be.

At one point in the narrative, Paul D makes this promise to Sethe.

Sethe, if I’m here with you, with Denver, you can go anhwere you want. Jump if you want to, ‘cause I’ll catch you, girl. I’ll catch you ‘fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I’ll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out.
(Morrison 55)

Essentially, he is telling her that no matter what she does, he will always be there for her, helping her in whatever way she needs him to, or, perhaps more appropriately, whatever she will allow him to do. Yet, when she entrusts her darkest secret, the story of her children in the shed and how she evaded Schoolteacher, Paul D becomes damaged. This singular act marks the complete

feminization of Paul D. He is crushed just like his tin, which bursts open with the news of the children's slaughter. He cannot save her from the past, nor can he help her if he does not understand what it is she did. And he certainly cannot become a father with a woman who is willing to kill her own babies. Once Sethe is done reminiscing, Paul D makes some excuse to get out of the house, and they both know that he does not mean to come back. All of the traits of manhood Paul D has established have been blown away like so much dust, but none so more than this: no matter what, a man stays.

If freedom meant a chance to reestablish manhood for Paul D, it was the exact opposite for Sethe. She hoped that her liberation would give her an opportunity to return to the maternal realm; she would have a family and a home of her own to care for, and she would no longer have to reserve her love for fear of losing those she cherishes. Lorraine Liscio clarifies this idea in her essay "Beloved's Narrative: Writing Mother's Milk" when she claims that "slave narratives attest to the fact that... women's preponderant concern ["in their quest for freedom"] was to save their children and retain control over their reproductive power" (34). Sethe's children are threatened by the very fact that they were born into slavery, and the control over the act of her procreation was threatened but not taken from her when she was raped by Schoolteacher's nephews. On the other hand, Sethe is undoubtedly unable to forget the story of her mother, a woman who killed every child but Sethe because they were all reminders of her rapes at the hands of her master. Sethe refuses to be put in that position, so she has to leave. Of course, Sethe's violation was accompanied by the one boy actually drinking her breast milk, an even more unsettling defilement. Her womanhood has been violated, and Sethe must reclaim it in order to be a free, whole person. This is the aspiration that drove Sethe on during her flight from Sweet Home; she has to get to Baby Suggs in time to give milk to her youngest and to ensure that the child in her womb would be nurtured enough to survive. In essence, it is impossible for Sethe to be a mother according to her own standards as long as she is a slave or transitioning from a slave to a free woman.

By nothing short of a miracle, both Sethe and Denver survive the journey from Sweet Home, and Sethe at long last manages to attain her dream of motherhood. Although the masculine/patriarchal presence of Halle is absent, Sethe still acts as a nurturing, doting mother with Baby Suggs fulfilling a matriarchal position. As far as Sethe knows, Halle is only a few days or weeks behind her. She knows nothing of the madness Halle endured after witnessing Sethe's truly disgusting rape. For twenty-eight days, Sethe finally feels as though she could be a woman and a mother. She is accepted by the community in this feminine role and feels she fits into it far more comfortably than she could have ever felt as a slave.

However, at the end of that month, Schoolteacher comes with the sole aim to bring her and the children back like a lost flock of sheep. Sethe's reaction to this invasion does not immediately strike one as typically feminine or maternal: she *logically* decides to murder her children in order to save them from Sweet Home, a kind of thought stereotypically relegated to the realm of the male. Of course, she only succeeds in ending the life of the unnamed baby, but the fact remains that Sethe manages to retreat from the world of the maternal even as she performs what she considers to be her most motherly act.

The murder of Beloved and the attempted murder of her three other children marks Sethe's turning. She can no longer languish in the passivity she longed for; she has become proactive to the point of insanity, doing the utmost to protect her babies from subjugation. This is the moment that breaks Baby Suggs, making it necessary for another member of the family to take the lead. This is the moment when the family needs Halle the most, but he is nowhere to be found, or perhaps still sitting in front of a churn with cream smeared across his face. This is the moment that, once released from prison, Sethe must assume the matriarchal void Baby Suggs has left open, and in doing so, must become the female "man of the house." Although Sethe in part held many of these traits during her time as a slave, the death of her child solidifies this aspect of her personality. Following that, she is viewed as a formidable character, although too proud and independent for her own good. In fact, she is resented for these qualities simply because of the fact that she is a woman. She has made herself too masculine for those who live around her, and perhaps that act is just as unforgivable as killing her own baby.

Following this horrific incident, Sethe becomes something of a lone warrior against the rest of the world. She intends to survive without the help of others, all of whom she suspects perceive her as a terrible woman. She assumes all of the weight and responsibility of running a household on top of the dense emotional fabric of 124, full of her would-be victims. She builds up defenses against the community and her memory, leaving her thinly stretched and immensely tired. It seems to get to the point where Sethe grows tired of always being the capable, "masculine" warrior of the family. For example, while remembering Baby Suggs, she imagines the old women telling her to "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield.... Don't study war no more" (Morrison 101). In her mind, she hears Baby Suggs telling her to drop her masculine role and assume a more feminine, maternal one. If Sethe stops fighting, she will lose much of what makes her like a man; in order to do so, someone must present themselves as being capable of taking Sethe's place. At one point, she perhaps considers Paul D a candidate, symbolically allowing him to "relieve the weight" of her breasts by holding them in his hands (21). Although breasts clearly suggest a feminine connotation, here they represent the weight of her responsibility. She failed in getting the milk to her baby, and she failed in being the nurturing mother with her act of violence. They are in a sense representative of what caused her masculine characteristics. The weight of them causes her pain, and she at one point thought Paul D could help take away some of that. Unfortunately, he is ultimately unable to do so after his effeminate vision of her is shattered and he comes to realize who Sethe truly is.

In the end, Sethe cannot stop from being a soldier trying to protect her family. There are some burdens she simply cannot lay down. Even towards the novel's end, when Beloved has her entirely conquered and bereft, Sethe still fights for her. When the recreation of the terrible day at 124 takes place in the final pages of *Beloved*, Sethe's reaction is once again violent – something one would typically associate with a man doing. However, this time, Sethe directs her anger towards a party outside of her family. Some could suggest that Sethe does what she should have done in the first place: attack the problem as opposed to the would-be victims of the problem. When she thinks a white man is coming to threaten her family and invade her space once more, "she flies.... The ice pick is in her hand" (Morrison 309). This time, she is willing to kill the threat rather than the threatened. Such a reaction is even more of a masculine response than the first. Typically, men are seen as problem solvers; they want to fix things. No one can deny that Sethe truly believes she is fixing the problem once and for all by removing the one who would

hurt her daughter. While the scene once again exemplifies the extent of what Sethe will do for her children, it is difficult to deny the masculine overtones of her choices.

Nevertheless, by the end of the novel, everything has changed. Paul D is once again on his way to 124 to visit Sethe. When he arrives, he finds she is even worse off than he could imagine. She is lying underneath the quilt Baby Suggs loved so much in her final days, humming a song with no one to hear it. She is expressionless and directionless, professing that she has “no plans at all” (Morrison 320). Seeing her miserable state, Paul D once again takes it upon himself to attempt to save Sethe. This time, she is truly in need of help and intervention, and this time, she is in no position to refuse it. Paul D is finally able to be the savior to his damsel in distress, or as Carden asserts “Paul D's rescue bespeaks a return to patriarchal scripts: we are left with a strong man bending over the bed of a supine, weakened woman, promising redemption in a space safe for domesticity” (421). In a rather twisted way, both parties have resumed their so-called “natural” gender roles.

At first glance, the message here seems to be that in order to be feminine, one must be brought low. Sethe is no longer competent and able to take care of multiple people; she cannot even take care of herself. By Paul D and the rest of society's standards, a man could never be in that position; therefore, Sethe can no longer be considered anything like a man. Moreover, if a woman was typically thought of as being incapable of saving others, then it must stand to reason that Paul D has regained his masculine status by finally managing to stage a successful rescue of a woman in desperate need of it. A conventional stasis returns, but the cost is too high. While Paul D's transformation by the novel's end is beneficial towards his own self-worth, Sethe is almost completely destroyed.

One reading of this outcome is that perhaps Sethe is being punished for her masculine ways. The town performed a similar ritual when they ostracized her, and a demon called Beloved nearly killed Sethe when she or it returned for revenge. One could suggest that Morrison is punishing her further for daring to be capable. All of the traits that make her powerful are ripped from her by the time Beloved is through, and Sethe ends up curled under a blanket singing songs to an empty room. Perhaps that is meant to be the price for a woman acting more like a man.

However, a more likely scenario is that this ending suggests the dangers of stereotypes. Both Sethe and Paul D were irrevocably damaged because they behaved in ways that traditionally opposed their biological genders, and both paid the price for it. Perhaps the message is that gender roles should not even factor in the equation. Sethe should have been allowed to be as strong as she could, and Paul D should not have felt less of a man simply because a ghost almost made him cry. If both, but especially Sethe, had been accepted as they were, Beloved never would have had a chance to manifest. The women in the community likely would have convinced Sethe to send the spirit of the dead baby off peacefully and permanently long ago, and even if she had manifested physically, there would have been support available. Furthermore, if Paul D had not been so obsessed with proving himself, he would not have felt the need to drive off the ghost in such a loud, violent manner. Things would have been much better for these characters if they had been allowed to live as their past experiences dictated, unfettered by conventional restraints. Unfortunately, it is impossible to rewrite a fantastic piece of fiction, so readers must make what they will of both characters' uncertain fates.

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