

*A Web Case Book on BELOVED by Toni Morrison*

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### **Nommo Barriers: Finding Bonds in the Chaos**

by  
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Hear more often things than beings,  
the voice of the fire listening,  
hear the voice of the water.  
Hear in the wind  
the bushes sobbing,  
it is the sigh of our forebears.

Those who are dead are never gone....  
they are in the tree that rustles...  
they are in the water that sleeps...  
they dead are not dead.

Those who are dead are never gone,  
they are in the breast of the woman,  
they are in the child who is wailing  
and in the firebrand that flames. (Handley 676)

\* \* \*

i am accused of tending to the past  
as if i made it,  
as if i sculpted it  
with my own hands. i did not.  
the past was waiting for me  
when i came,  
a monstrous unnamed baby,

and i with my mother's itch  
 took it to breast  
 and named it  
 History.  
 she is more human now,  
 learning language everyday,  
 remembering faces, names and dates.  
 when she is strong enough to travel  
 on her own, beware, she will. (Rody 92)

These two poems perfectly encompass the feeling that the novel *Beloved* gives us when we read it. The first poem encompasses an African idea known as *nommo*, which is the power that words contain to call into being that which to which they refer. To become *muntu*, which is a category of existence human beings belong to, we must be named. Thus, those children who die without names never attain the level of being *muntu*, and remain *kintu*, which is a category of existence to which *nommo* can restore power and vitality.

The second poem, entitled "i am accused of tending to the past...", seems to present this idea as it relates to *Beloved*. It depicts a maternal figure that takes her past and adopts it as she would a child and this child she adopts slowly outgrows her as the days go on. In this way it is similar, but it is also vastly different in the way that the mother pays heed to the past and seems to focus on it too much, whereas in the novel *Beloved*, Morrison depicts Sethe as being neglectful of her past and shoving it behind her until Paul D stops by for a visit.

I am doing a reader response critique of the novel, yet I find that some analysis of the manner in which it is written is needed for me to show why I reacted to it in the way that I did. Some people found problems with the method in which New Criticism handled books and other works of fiction. They, first of all, found that the style of critique was too formulaic to really work with, and second of all, found that the style some things were written in did not really conform to the way in which New Criticism was looking to analyze them (Lynn 61-62). These things seem especially apparent in texts such as *Beloved*.

James Phelan wrote an article in which he directly dealt with the issue I am discussing here. He divides the book into two different segments: both the difficult and the stubborn. The difficult is that which cannot readily be interpreted with Standard Academic Interpretation, and the stubborn is that which cannot be interpreted with Standard Academic Interpretation, no matter how hard one may try (Phelan 712-714). This difficulty (and stubbornness) found within the novel is what initially piqued my interest. At first, I found it frustrating that narrative voice seemed to sift about the information in the book to the point where it seemed no longer cogent to me, but then I found a pleasure in unraveling the mystery that I was finding in its pages.

The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was sweet home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although, there was not a

leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. (Morrison, 7)

Such a passage as this shows exactly the type of enigma that is evoked by the style that Morrison tells us the story in. Here Boy and Sweet Home had not yet been introduced at this point, yet they make their way into one of Sethe's visions as things both ominous and thought provoking. The first time I read this, I thought I had looked over something earlier and was bewildered by the appearance of the things within the story. Eventually, though, as I read on, I found I had not made a mistake and for that matter was fully justified in my confusion.

A high school student exemplifies similar confusion when Paul D is made to give one of the guards that are keeping an eye on him oral sex. He says:

When Morrison writes, she doesn't come straight out and tell you what is going on or what's about to happen. Like the time when Paul D was imprisoned in Alfred, Georgia and he was forced to perform oral sex on one of the guards. Instead of Morrison coming out and telling you what is exactly happening she writes:

'Breakfast? Want some breakfast nigger?'

'Yes sir.'

'Hungry nigger?'

'Yes sir.'

'Here you go.' (Matthews 7)

This confusion that I share with this student is (while a little embarrassing on my part) fully intended by Morrison. As Evelyne Jaffe Schreiber explains it, Morrison is using a montage to tracking method similar to that which Hitchcock used in his films to unsettle his viewers. This is referred to as the "Hitchcockian Blot" and also is called a phallic image (Schreiber 3). Amidst these swarms of images that we are brought into, Morrison gives us some striking scenes that make us feel that we are no longer the ones observing, but that occasionally the book is looking back at us; it seems to have its own life (Schreiber 1).

Schreiber compares *Beloved* to Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*. In Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, we are like people watching blackfaces in the way that we are seeing what is happening to African-Americans, yet can still relate because all the things being expressed in what is happening are being depicted by other whites. In Morrison's novel, we get the pure, unadulterated African-American viewpoint. For white readers like myself, we can never truly understand the world that she is depicting nor the emotions that she is trying to conjure up (Schreiber 3). It seems that Morrison is depicting a type of esoteric world to the reader that we are not allowed to fully enter, yet at the same time she tries to let us lose ourselves within this world.

Even in the novel Morrison sets up a depiction of memory being like the capturing of photographs that won't disappear even if what they had captured has long since gone. Sethe is talking to Denver, and when Denver asks if people can still see things once they are gone from this world, Sethe says: "Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else" (Morrison 43).

To me, this is how the entirety of the novel should be viewed. As the novel progresses, we find the character of Beloved. Even by the end of the novel, she remains intangible. Martha J Cutter uses a quote from Barthes to depict how most people try to process Beloved's character: "'Rereading [is] an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us 'throw away' the story once it has been consumed ('devoured')...[Rereading] is tolerated only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, professors)...'" (Barthes 15-16)' (Cutter 61) From this, Cutter asserts that most readers of this book try to pass off the ghost of Beloved to be merely the ghost of Sethe's unnamed child. (Cutter 61) But it is not only this; it is more. William R. Handley asks:

[I]s it and imaginative reconstruction of history, a performance of the African concept of *nommo*, or a fictional account of something that can never "truly" be known, perhaps something more like an allegory? Is "Beloved" as an epitaph sufficient, deficient, or does it exceed something unspeakable? Is the girl called Beloved Sethe's reincarnated daughter, a survivor of the Middle Passage, as Elizabeth House has argued, or, as Denver suggests, 'more.' (Handley 680)

What I believe is that Beloved is exactly that which Denver suggests that she is: this concept of "more." If we are to look back at the concepts of *nommo*, *muntu* and *kintu*, you can see how I view Beloved as all that pertains to the period of our history that deals with the gruesomeness and the dejection that had to do with the period of slavery. Beloved not only is Sethe's daughter, she is also the book you read as you find her personification within its pages; she is a survivor of the Middle Passage, she is Baby Suggs reincarnation, she is everything that Sethe was trying to leave behind her and could not fully let go. Baby Suggs kept on telling her to lay down her sword and shield, and Sethe tried as hard as she could, but Paul D's arrival at 124 kept that from happening.

Something that kept my interest throughout the entirety of the novel was the dog, Here Boy. He seems barely lucid to the reader as the novel progresses and through this, he also seems to be omnipresent, in a manner of speaking. He's recollected in memories of Sweet Home, and eighteen years later he is seen at 124. In the second to last chapter of the novel, Paul D sees Here Boy standing on the porch steps, weezing and shedding his coat bit by bit, and even mentions that he is just an ancient dog. Up to this point I assumed Here Boy existed on the same ethereal plane that Beloved exists in. He does seem to kind of lapse in and out of the story. Some of the instances where he is in the story seem to bring to mind the "Hitchcockian Blot" that was spoken of earlier.

The narration of the novel and the images that pass in and out of its focus seem to be very clear and corporeal, yet at the same time blurry and ethereal. This is the way that I think our memories in general tend to work, and so I see this as Morrison's attempt to include us in a memory that we really cannot be included in. We go through this story, and we encounter both the difficult and the stubborn, for it is not a story to be passed on.

I can see this as a way in which Morrison tries to give the non-black reading audience and those that did not have to go through the struggle of slavery a chance at having some form of empathy for the African-American people, though the most we will ever be able to conjure up is sympathy. By getting us lost within the text, Morrison makes us a part of the novel. In the last chapter of the novel, she addresses this issue:

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had not spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise....

It was not a story to pass on. (Morrison 323-324)

Phelan points out that in this section Morrison directly takes away anyone's ability to fully shirk the power of the story. Sure, white readers like me may try to get rid of the guilt that the story hands us by saying we can never really understand, but the book has directly told us that this will never really happen. Since we have lived with *Beloved*, we will constantly have her in our memories (Phelan 721).

It becomes like a challenge at this point. Morrison states that everyone in the novel forgets about *Beloved*, and it is implied that she is assuming the reader will attempt to do so as well. But being told to forget about something is like being told to not think about something. If someone comes up to you and says "Don't think about a ball," what are you most likely to do following this command? If you work like most other people, chances are you will think about a ball. The same concept applies here. If we are told to forget something, it is locked in our minds as something we must try to forget. In trying to forget it, we must continue to remember what it is we must forget, and thus it becomes next to impossible to forget. In the next section of the final chapter Morrison seems to bring us into this disturbing tale even further:

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative - looked at too long - shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do.

This was not a story to pass on. (Morrison, 324)

Here we see the concept of *Beloved* living on as in the same way that the pictures of rememory that Sethe talks about live on long past the point at which the things they depict have passed. These are the *kintu*, the unnamed things that abide in this world without a place to call home and wander in search for someone that will claim them as their own. In this segment Morrison seems to point out that which I have stated earlier: *Beloved* represents all that is repressed in our memories because it is *kintu* and for this reason has no power about the slave period here in America. Now that Morrison has brought this story to our attention, we will never forget it and it will haunt us in the manner that *Beloved* haunted Sethe.

The use of present tense in the last sentence of this section also seems to directly pull us into what is being addressed here. The switch between past and present tense is used throughout the novel, and is something that I found difficult to understand. Not so much that it was hard for me to follow when I paid close attention, but when doing an initial reading of a novel one tends to get tripped up by things like that. I found myself

craving a rereading of the novel, which is what has led to my discovery of these newfound ideas. Before my rereading, it all just seemed to kind of swirl together. I felt like a child, lost in a darkened room to which he was invited and did not belong. For this reason, I felt a slight irritation toward the book.

After rereading, though, I found a new appreciation for the book. I felt like the initial trip had just been an experience through which I could get a taste for what was to come, and when I was able to fully understand what was happening when I reread the book I felt that the initial trip had enhanced my second reading of the story. I agree with James Phelan when he says that this novel is both difficult and stubborn, and thus I think it needs to be looked over carefully more than once. Barthes states that rereading is contradictory to the ideological habits of our society, and due to this many readers miss out on fully experiencing the novel in the manner that those who reread it do. In the context of Reader Response theory, a critique is supposed to be a reader's initial response to a work of writing, and thus rereading would be frowned upon. But I found that my response to reading this novel was wanting to read it again so that I may be more cognizant of what happened as the story progressed; the novel's stubbornness brought out a stubborn desire within me. It may be difficult and stubborn, it may seem a jumbled assortment of images that we must sort through like an "I Spy" puzzle and it may seem to leave out all audiences other than those that have the proper history to truly relate to the morbid tale that is unfolded, but Morrison has tried her hardest to let those of us who wish to enter her world do so with a plethora of images that seem to envelope us in a new type of understanding we thought unattainable.

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