

*A Web Case Book on BELOVED by Toni Morrison*

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## **A Response to *Beloved***

by  
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*Beloved* arouses deep emotions and thoughts within its readers, as a human we are ordained to have a reaction. *Beloved* is a novel with layers upon layers of ideas, theories, emotions and perspectives intertwined. Therefore, as a reader, one can expect not only a reaction, but a reaction that will make a lasting impression. These reactions most often come in the form of perspectives that include feminist, postcolonial, and historical. These perspectives are the views that readers take in response to *Beloved*. The lenses that we apply to the text help us to objectify *Beloved* apart from the reader, so that the reader may understand their reaction. When we allow ourselves to dissociate from the thoughts formulated in our head and hearts, we allow ourselves time to cope, to process, and to understand. It is our instinct to begin to comprehend and to put into perspective all reaction we as humans are subject. In *Beloved*, Morrison's technique allows the reader to interact directly with the character and text alike.

A reader's response in theory can have endless meaning. Even the most basic or unintelligent response to *Beloved* still qualifies as a valid response. The standard being that it is a reaction based upon facts or evidence from the literature. A well thought out reaction requires that the reader pursue the reaction, in order to formulate a well thought conclusion to why they acquired such a response. Many responses have been formulated and reformulated to rationalize the effect *Beloved* had upon the reader, due to the endless depth and meaning that is contained within the novel. We find reactions based on feminism, post colonialism, historical, deconstruction, and many more will continue to surface with each new reader. A reader, like a chemical reaction, is affected by every element that surrounds it. Everything in that element from the time of its creation has technically affected its recent reaction; in this case, it is with *Beloved*. The reader, in

reaction with *Beloved*, has had every experience in their life up to the completion of *Beloved* affect their reaction to *Beloved*. Literature like that of *Beloved*, that offers ambiguous meanings or latent themes throughout the work, is an ideal formula for response. These latent themes and levels of ambiguity are techniques that the author uses to conjure up emotion and correlation that relate to our own personal experiences. As a reader, when we respond intimately with the text it becomes personal and more meaningful. Many times, we find this emotion disturbing and our response is a way to ease our minds and souls. When we find a resolution through our well-thought response, our emotions and the unsettling feelings we had are calmed.

Morrison's ending to *Beloved* is at best labeled ambiguous; it is an incomplete ending that offers the reader no true certainty or justice to the possible main themes. Essentially, the ambiguity created in *Beloved* is a framework to create the reader's own justified response. It is impossible to think that Morrison's ambiguity is unintentional. In an interview, she justifies her use of ambiguity:

You don't end a story in the oral tradition- you can have the little message at the end, your little moral, but the ambiguity is deliberate because it doesn't end, it's an ongoing thing and the reader or the listener is in it and you have to THINK. (Cutter 7)

If it was Morrison's intent to have her readers think, then, it is safe to assume that it led to thoughts about ourselves and question the way we view *Beloved* each time we read it. Toni Morrison's aim is to enable us to think for ourselves, which leads us to inquire on the perspectives with which we choose to view *Beloved*. In questioning our perspectives, we consequently question how we have developed these perspectives within our lifetime. Morrison says, "the reader or the listener is in it" (Cutter 7). Morrison is asking of her readers to complete the literature and fill in the meaning behind the ambiguity.

Morrison is developing the issue of subjectivity, which is when an individual is completely dependent on another to validate their existence. In the novel, we find this happens many times, throughout to all of the characters. However, Morrison is begging an even greater question to her readers, which is to have the courage to be involved in the subjectivity. She could be asking us to be involved by validating how the characters feel and confirming their existence. On the other hand, Morrison could be asking us to confirm our own emotions to what is happening in the novel. Using the tool of ambiguity, Morrison subjects the reader to the literature. The characters struggle throughout the novel with this issue of subjectivity.

Denver initially thought that "her existence depends upon being visually "claimed" by the other (*Beloved* 274) When she and Beloved go into the cold house for cider and Beloved suddenly disappears, Denver collapses into tears, crying because she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing. She grabs at the hair at her temples to get enough to uproot it and halt the melting for a while (*Beloved* 123). (Kirwan 9)

Denver was the only character who forced herself into a world that she did not know. She went out into the world believing it gave no recognition. "The opportunity to possess

subjectivity is squelched at every possible venue as slavery denies Baby Suggs friendship, motherhood, wifehood, sisterhood and daughterhood” (Kirwan 7). It is ironic that Baby Suggs’ possibility to feel recognition was trampled repeatedly because of her experience she passed on the wisdom to Denver who became the only character to venture outside of the family for recognition. Morrison develops in her writing these techniques so that the text becomes engaging to the reader; a response to such writing is inevitable.

Morrison’s novel leads to problematic situations when discussing it in a group or with a community of individuals. When an argument arises, such as the concern with Beloved’s identity, both sides have validity or facts to support their conclusion.

Neither the text’s implied activity nor the community’s shared reading strategies can be said to determine interpretation, for even when readers inhabit the same interpretive community, they must struggle to persuade another of the ‘facts’ regarding a particular text. (Lynn 65)

For instance, Morrison gives grounding that “Beloved had been locked up by some white man for his own purposes, and never let out the door” (119). On the other hand, she gives reference that Beloved is the dead child of Sethe because of the scar under her chin and the song that only Sethe’s children know. Both sides of the argument are valid and facts can be found in the literature to identify with both sides. “The many interpretations of Beloved’s identity reveal the complexity of Morrison’s character. Not only is she read differently by different characters of the novel but also by different readers of the novel. Each new interpretation of Beloved adds another layer to her already thick identity” (Kirwan 4). As discussions were taking place within the classroom, as a community of educated students, there were instances of confusion and spontaneous points made about all major themes ambiguously presented. There was deliberation concerning the origin of characters and action of characters. In discussion, confusion was brought up concerning the action of Paul D and his chain gang escaping in unison under the gates they were contained in. The way Morrison told the story of Paul D and his chain gang forced us to use our imagination concerning the details. As a class, we weaved our own interpretation on what happened to Paul D and his chain gang and used passages in the book to confirm our newly formed view. “So the ‘unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction’ that Rosenblatt encourages ought to be checked against the text modified in a continuing process, or ‘transaction’” (Lynn 64). Although, we did not understand in detail how all the men in harmony broke through the gates we emotionally understood their freedom. Later, as I personally reread the Paul D and chain gain passage, I filled in new details and came to a different conclusion and because of this, I not only understood their freedom but also something that I did not see before: their strength. This proves that with every new perspective and with every reading of ambiguous literature, we allow ourselves to grow and draw deeper conclusions.

When responding to what we read, there is always the concern that the reader is reading too closely or reading “hypertextually” (Lynn 66). When critically analyzing literature there is a possibility that the deep conclusions we have come to are not what the author intended; in fact we draw upon these conclusions because of our own intention.

In a sense, the reader confronts two texts: one in which the character lives,

and another in which the character dies; one that has a more detailed explanation, and one that doesn't. The reader chooses which text to read and can even read them both by going back and choosing differently. (Lynn 66)

In reading *Beloved*, the reader is offered the freedom to read it with the character or without the character's connection. The reader is offered choices and is forced to think about what they will be accepting. Morrison shows the audience the extremes in every circumstance mentioned, allowing the reader to draw the conclusion on either side of the extreme or anywhere in the middle. "Like the novel itself, the character of Beloved resists a singular interpretation" (Kirwan 1). In the novel, we can come to the conclusion that Beloved never existed that she was just a figurative problem. We can also identify Beloved as Sethe's dead child so she would be a ghost that had come to life. She could also represent the conditions of slavery and the damage that is resulted from a life of slavery. Beloved's character develops in many different areas of the spectrum; to say that Beloved is one idea is not wrong, but to fail to recognize that there are other ways in interpret Beloved's presence would be stifling to the growth of the reader and the novel.

The act of rereading literature that causes great reaction is vital. At different times in our life we have experienced different episodes. These episodes may change the way we used to view certain ideals or concepts. Essentially, by rereading *Beloved* at different times in our life we can choose to read the book in a different light with a different lens. This different lens may offer another interpretation and spark another thought or emotion. "For Morrison, rereading is not an activity conflicted to certain 'marginal' categories of people, as Barthes rather sardonically phrases it, but is fundamentally necessary to the creation of the openness that is at the core of language, of storytelling" (Cutter 14). Being a responsive reader does not mean to respond in just one way or with one lens, it means constantly to adjust and to use all lenses. "Reading becomes an infinite process-not a stone dropped into a pond, but an ever-expanding series of circles radiating out from a center, a text, an interpretation, a reader" (Cutter 14). It allows insight and wisdom to grow within the reader because it forces the reader to look deeply within each perspective. For example, Sethe killed her children. If someone who was involved in having children and read about Sethe killing their own children they might be appalled if they did not understand slavery. For those who have experienced slavery and subjugation of another they could relate to the actions of Sethe because the experiences that they have went through in their own life makes it easier to relate to Sethe's action. Although the examples that Morrison gives in *Beloved* are extreme nonetheless, they are an accurate depiction of what individuals go through or have gone through.

The way Morrison writes *Beloved* stirs great emotional reaction. However, it may be difficult to pin point what aspect of the writing that creates this reaction because it exists in endless places. Given the same question three different students reacted completely differently in response to how Morrison's writing affected them. One student, Ashley Fromm, wrote how the structural body of the writing affected her response:

The writing style was fragmented and sometimes confusing, but it was also very powerful and balanced. Morrison's use of clipped sentences and numerous fragments conveyed control; her sentences said all they needed

to without excess phrasing or punctuation. I appreciated the shifting narrative tone, which allowed even the antagonists (schoolteacher, for example) to have their say. *Beloved*'s section of narration was unique, as it forwent conventional sentence structure and punctuation. This format frustrated me, though, as each thought seemed to run into the next. (Fromm 1)

Another student, Patrick Steadman, commented that Morrison's language was "unique and the words poetic" (Steadman 1). A third student, Klay Baynar, examined the overall content of the writing:

I thought it was interesting how, before the appearance of *Beloved*; there were very few stories of the past. When *Beloved* appeared and her obsession grew, the novel became flooded with stories of the past. I thought this was interesting because I thought that by writing this way, Morrison was trying to communicate to readers the importance of an individual's relationship with his or her past. (Baynar 1)

Due to the definition of reader response, none of these examinations are incorrect or inaccurate. On the contrary, we can see with each one of these examinations we are brought closer not only to the text, but also to ourselves. Reading these examinations, we can identify three places where Morrison's writing style affects our interpretation and our emotional response. Our emotional response is also manipulated when she describes rape, the middle passage, and many other forms of abuse as well as murder of the innocent. The combination of the writing styles examined and the content described led the reader to feel uncomfortable, yet connected to the character's experiences. Because the issues in *Beloved* are being discussed in ambiguous form, we are able to connect with the character or with the idea in a more enlightened way.

The disconnection that Morrison uses to describe the higher level of comprehension and connection from the reader to the text is a paradox. However, in this paradox exists a deep level of comprehension that cannot be described by common language. One reader presented the notion that "I had the distinct sense that Morrison had carefully steered me in such conclusions" (Fromm 1). This response gives evidence to the intent behind the paradox that Morrison constructs for the reader. This reader did not only experience enlightenment but she knew Morrison ordained it through the text. In reading *Beloved*, we are simultaneously connected to the text because we are reading it and disconnected because of the writing style Morrison has incorporated. Morrison does not explicitly detail what is happening to the characters, we must become the character by choosing their details if we want to continue reading. We must choose what path in our imagination Sethe, *Beloved* and Denver take.

Morrison's text creates this unhomeliness for the reader in the points where the real emerges, producing for the reader a sense of unease in the shift from object to subject when the traditional object-Other- becomes the subject... These varying points in the text, materialized through shifts in perspective, create a bombardment- the montage- of pieces of the real. (Schreiber 4)

The montage that Morrison creates allows the reader to receive a reaction according to how they piece together the work. Because the work is a montage it can continuously be

rearranged offering new reactions. At times, the forcefulness of this decision-making may also be a factor in making the reader uncomfortable.

As a reader and as a human we do not like to be in a constant state of discomfort. Therefore, we objectify literature so that it does not affect us deeply. If we label an uncomfortable feeling, and stick it in a tin can in our hearts as Paul D did, we may fall victim to anything because we stand true to nothing. It is harder to rationalize our emotions and try to comprehend what we are feeling. Morrison forces the reader to rationalize why they choose the particular montage. Essentially, she does not give the reader an easy way out of the situation. One reader offers the conclusion “*Beloved* is all and in all, in every physically or mentally enslaved person, then she is a savior of each person’s soul. By forcing each person to face their problems, and reflect on their heritage, problems can be overcome and we can work toward the future” (Jurgens 7). In this response, the reader has presented the idea that the identity of *Beloved* is not a person but a ubiquitous problem. In another response, we find that:

“*Beloved* returns in *Jazz*, yet remains a mystery. So we must start over-reading and rereading, motioning to future readings as well as contemporary ones, creating and recreating that endlessly flexible language, that endlessly shareable world, that endlessly changing text that is storytelling itself.” (Cutter 15)

In this conclusion, the author has chosen to read *Beloved* into other Morrison novels and leave *Beloved* in the text as an existing character that exists in the creation and formation of new ideas derived from Morrison’s literature. Therefore meaning that one true conclusion of *Beloved* does not or cannot exist due to the flexibility of language.

Being a reader of an incredible piece of literature like *Beloved* is an experience in and of itself. Morrison has the ability through her techniques and aptitudes as a great writer to create a battle within the reader. The battle is filtered through lenses that we have created; an accurate response is one that draws upon the facts or passages of the literature. It is the responsibility of the reader, continuously to adjust his or her lenses through life experiences and through rereading of ambiguous texts. Reading a great novel becomes an experience in itself when read well, has the ability to change our perspectives and offer insight in the future.

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