

*A Web Case Book on BELOVED by Toni Morrison*

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## **Psychological Criticism of Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

by  
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When reading Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, it is easy to see how readers would question the actions of her characters. Some characters display behavior that would seem barbaric and cruel to the average individual. However, when delving deeper, it is easier to see how the severities of the characters' actions are built on the psychological repression of their pasts. These pasts are filled with the traumas of slavery, and each character has suffered in his, or her, own way. However, the collective suffering can all be traced back to one character's actions. Morrison's main character, Sethe, has caused a great deal of pain to herself and to those around her. Her actions have caused others to respond, both physically and psychologically, therefore complicating their lives in accordance with hers. Sethe's relationship with others has caused a great deal of pain, a pain that all of the novel's characters must strive to overcome. Morrison guides her readers through the pain of extracting the memories that these characters have so long repressed, and the struggles they face "to confront a past they cannot forget. Indeed, it is apparent forgetting that subjects them to traumatic return; confrontation requires a direct attempt at remembering" (Barnett 419). All of Morrison's characters have difficulty recovering from their pasts, and their relationships with Sethe do nothing to help them find their peace of mind. By looking at each character's connection to Sethe, we as readers gain an understanding of their actions, and Sethe's influence on such actions.

We can also decide if *Beloved*'s actions against Sethe are justified, and to what extent Sethe should be punished for her past. *Beloved*'s actions also act as a representation for all slaves' suffering and the need to overcome the pain that they have worked so diligently to repress. Professor of English, Pamela E. Barnett, believes *Beloved* to hold a certain power over the others in Morrison's novel. "Her insistent manifestation constitutes a challenge for the characters who have survived rapes inflicted while they were enslaved: directly, and finally communally, to

confront a past they cannot forget” (Barnett 419). The horrors of slavery hang over Morrison’s characters, and as we watch their lives, their interactions with one another, and their interactions with *Beloved*, we can see the struggles that they face when look at their pasts.

Morrison’s novel is centered on the psychological repercussions of rape and abuse. Dr. Robin E. Field focuses on Morrison’s representation of these traumas. “Such is the case with Sethe, the most prominent of the novel’s many sufferers, who bears the physical scars of slavery’s terrible violence upon her back” (Field 3). Sethe was attacked by two young white boys who held her down and stole her milk, preventing her from feeding her daughter. “After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Hold me down and took it” (Morrison 19). Sethe considered her milk for her daughter to be her most important possession, and in losing it, she lost a large part of herself. “Her complete focus upon bringing the milk to her children, who have traveled to Baby Suggs’s house ahead of her, to the utter disregard of the pain she suffers during the journey, underscores how Sethe considers her milk to be of greater value than her body itself” (Field 3). She repressed the memory of the attack, causing her to never fully move on with her life, but live, instead, constantly trying to subdue the memories that threaten to haunt her every day. “As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (Morrison 6). Sethe’s life was full of the horrors of slavery, creating memories that caused her to act rashly. Because of her attack, she killed her daughter so that she could never be a victim of the same abuse. Many slaves were victim to such attacks during their lives. They were not seen as people, but as objects that could easily be taken and used to the slave owner’s advantage. Sethe’s memory of the boys taking her milk became much stronger than her memory of being raped, because she chose to block out that memory entirely. However, we discover the real importance of her rape, as it is the actual focus of her life and the horror that she wishes to keep her daughter from having to live. Barnett analyzes Sethe’s actions as such: “For Sethe, being brutally overworked, maimed, or killed is subordinate to the overarching horror of being raped and “dirtied” by whites; even dying at the hands of one’s mother is subordinate to rape” (Barnett 419). Although it looked as if Sethe’s grief was because of her lost milk, her true anguish came from being raped, and it was that fate that she sought to protect her daughter from. “Sethe believes death to be a kinder alternative than rape,” and that is the mentality that drives her to seek such protection for her daughter (Field 4). While her actions may have spared her daughter from a fate, in Sethe’s eyes, worse than death, they still hold severe consequences that have helped pave the lives of all those that remain in Sethe’s presence.

Paul D is one of the many characters that suffers as a result of Sethe’s actions. Sethe brings *Beloved* into her home, believing she is the daughter killed out of love and protection so many years before. *Beloved* becomes a haunting figure that feeds off of the lives of those around her. She becomes “a catalyst for Paul D’s recollection of his past” (Barnett 420). Paul D has, like Sethe, struggled under the harsh conditions of slavery. He has suffered severe psychological tragedies that have forced him into a state of repression, keeping him from healing properly. *Beloved* brings these memories out and forces him to open his “little tobacco tin” that holds the horrors of his past (Morrison 137). “Despite the characters’ efforts to diffuse the power of the past, the ghost baby, like the traumatic nightmare, intrudes on the present, forcing Sethe and Paul D to remember what they have tried unsuccessfully to forget” (Barnett 420). *Beloved* takes advantage of Paul D and forces herself upon him. He becomes a victim of rape in the same manner as Sethe, and he forces his memories into hiding to keep from realizing his pain. This pain inflicted from *Beloved* is a direct result of Sethe killing her daughter. *Beloved* exists

because of Sethe's actions, and she intends to wreak havoc on the lives of all those that are close to Sethe. Beloved takes Paul D's respect for himself and makes his life, already full of remorse, even harder to live. "He is the only principal character who must deal with two forced sexual encounters, and these encounters are central to his constant mediation on the meaning of his manhood" (Barnett 423). Beloved strips Paul D of his manhood, causing him to question himself and work persistently to suppress the memories that threaten to taunt him. Paul D's suffering is, in great part, because of Sethe's actions against Beloved.

Sethe's daughter, Denver, also suffers because of Sethe's decisions. Denver has always been alone in the world, her older brothers having run away, and Beloved being killed at such a young age. Because their house is haunted by the spirit of Beloved, before she returns, no children have ever dared to seek closeness with Denver. Such solitude can cause severe psychological damage, and Denver struggles to find a sense of meaning and purpose in her life. Beloved's arrival serves as test of Denver's worth and her ability to connect with another. She watches over and protects Beloved, just as if they were truly sisters. Beloved feeds off of Denver's attention, but turns that same attention to Sethe. Beloved longs for closeness with Sethe that is not meant to bring them together, but to make her feel the pain that she has caused. "Beloved, like the repressed, returns against Sethe's will, and when she arrives, she is hungry for more than her mother's love and attention" (Barnett 420). Beloved asks questions about Sethe's past, and Sethe openly shares them with her, while she "feeds on a diet of Sethe's past and serves as the materialization of Sethe's memory" (Barnett 420). While Denver believes that she is creating a bond with Beloved, she is really being used in order for her mother to suffer. Sethe brings Beloved into the lives of those around her, while Beloved does nothing but seek to destroy them. Because of her guilt, Sethe cannot see past the pain that Beloved is causing her, and those around her. She focuses entirely on her child returned, and the opportunity to correct her mistakes. Sethe's actions show her selfishness and her need to seek approval from Beloved.

Because Sethe does so much to seek Beloved's approval, Denver's feelings are never fully considered. "Excluded from the Beloved-Sethe dyad, Denver is forced into the role of the outside other, and assuming that role is her salvation" (Schapiro 206). Sethe and Beloved share a past that Denver is not a part of. Sethe's grief and remorse cause her to view Beloved as a second chance. The daughter that she killed has come back and, in Sethe's mind, this is her opportunity to repair the damage that was done so many years before. Although making peace with Beloved can help her to heal, it also prevents Sethe from seeing what Beloved is doing to her life and her relationship with Denver. Sethe believes that she can trust Beloved, and she does so without thinking of the consequences. Believing she can trust her mother's judgment, Denver also trusts Beloved and truly believes them to be sisters. She cares for Beloved diligently, while Beloved slowly drains what little stability is left in Sethe's life. Sethe's choices are constantly affecting Denver, and they continue to keep her from having the close relationships that she has always longed for.

As the novel progresses, we as readers find ourselves questioning, does Sethe deserve the treatment that Beloved has placed up on her? Sethe's worst fear for her children is that they will be attacked in the same manner that she was. She cannot bear the thought of them living with the same pain that has engulfed her mind for so many years. It is evident that Sethe loves her children and wishes for their safety, but such protection becomes questionable in the eyes of others. Because Sethe's pain was so intense, it blinded her from the reality of the mistake she

was making. Beloved seeks to connect herself to Sethe in order to recreate the pain that Sethe has caused. “Beloved is the reanimated body of Sethe’s murdered baby, and she metaphorically drains Sethe’s vitality” (Barnett 421). Beloved aims to weaken her mother, and make her feel the remorse that she has struggled to forget. It is essential for Sethe to face her pain, in order to move on with her life and heal properly. While Beloved brings out these repressed feelings, she does not do so for the right reasons. Sethe should feel a natural guilt over what she has done, but Beloved’s aim is to slowly destroy her mother for what she has done. Because Sethe wishes to please her daughter, she is oblivious to Beloved’s power over her. Beloved is slowly draining Sethe’s life from her body, and the weaker Sethe becomes, the stronger and more powerful Beloved’s control over her becomes. Sethe’s struggle to love the daughter that she lost and to find peace of mind takes a new form of strength that has otherwise been unknown.

Beloved becomes more than just a repressed memory, but also a representation for the entire community. “A wounded, enraged baby is the central figure of the book, both literally, in the character of Beloved, and symbolically, as it struggles beneath the surface of the other major characters” (Schapiro 195). Her actions not only symbolize Sethe’s remorse, but the collective suffering of slaves during this time. Slaves faced extreme brutality and Morrison focuses on rape and sexual assault as the most terrifying form of abuse. It is because of this abuse that Morrison’s characters are trapped in their pasts, unable to move on from the psychological damages that they have endured. “Morrison revises the conventional slave narrative by insisting on the primacy of sexual assault over other experiences of brutality” (Barnett 420). However, as stated by Barbara Schapiro, “the worst atrocity of slavery, the real horror the novel exposes, is not physical death but psychic death” (Schapiro 195). Both instances are true, as these aspects work together to portray the psychological damages that slavery caused its victims. Morrison’s focus on rape is evident, and it is used to symbolize the psychological effects of all aspects of slavery. Under times of slavery, blacks were not allowed to have a sense of self, a sense of individuality, or self-worth.

“The major characters in the novel are all working out of a deep loss to the self, a profound narcissistic wound that results from a breakdown and distortion of the earliest relations between self and other. In the case of Beloved, the intense desire for recognition evolves into enraged narcissistic omnipotence and a terrifying, tyrannical domination” (Schapiro 197).

Our characters, like all slaves, have never been treated as if their lives were of significant worth or value. They are property to be used at the whim of their masters, without any thought as to their rights as humans. D. Scott Hinson takes notice of the slaves’ inability to confront the terrors placed upon them. “The community represses and is unable to identify the violence, white oppression, that is the root of its collapse and entrapment in cycles of violence” (Hinson 148). The violence aimed at slaves was so incomprehensible that many could not face the reality of the horrors in their lives. They are unable to know the true meanings of love and desire, for fear that such things could be ripped from beneath them at any time. “Within the parameters of slavery, romantic and generative outcomes of love and desire are thwarted, redirected, stolen; therefore, for many former slaves, to experience freedom means to recouple domestic places and events” (Carden, Mary Paniccia 405). While slaves may have been freed from a life of servitude, their psychological damage keeps them trapped in a world where they cannot heal. Characters such as Sethe and Paul D struggle to find themselves after opening the pasts that they have tried so long

to repress. Beloved's desire to know herself becomes a harsh vengeance that is meant to destroy Sethe for what she has done. The struggles our characters face in finding themselves serve as symbols for the psychological battle that all slaves faced when deciding who they were and what their lives could be.

Beloved and Sethe's relationship also signifies the psychological connection between mothers and their children. Because slaves were seen merely as property, the importance of families was not considered when deciding where they would be sent to work. Many children were torn from their mothers at very young ages, a trauma that is nearly impossible to recover from.

“For Morrison's characters, African-Americans in a racist, slave society, there is no reliable other to recognize and affirm their existence. The mother, the child's first vital other, is made unreliable or unavailable by a slave system which either separates her from her child or so enervates and depletes her that she has no self with which to confer recognition” (Schapiro 194).

Morrison focuses on this trauma and its psychological impact on her characters. “Her statement is thus true in that the slave system has choked off the vital circulation between mother and child so crucial to the development of the self” (Schapiro 200). A large part of childhood development lies with the psychological connection that children have with their mothers. When that connection does not exist, children are permanently damaged, and have a much harder time defining a sense of self and identity. Beloved's lack of identity is what drives her to delve into Sethe's past. She enjoys hearing Sethe's stories because they give her a sense of understanding. She is gaining a new closeness to her mother that she has never known. Slavery drove families apart, making it virtually impossible for children to find the connection that is so important to their psychological development.

All of Morrison's characters struggle with the psychological repression of their pasts. While much of their pain stems from the horrors of slavery, it also comes from their relationship with Sethe. Throughout the novel, Sethe suffers more psychological damage than any other character, making it logical that others would find themselves entangled in her life. Such tragedies are difficult to heal from and it is easy to see how locking away such memories would seem like the answer. As readers, we may find it difficult to relate to Sethe's actions. Killing her daughter was a very drastic measure to take, but because of the psychological traumas of her past, she was unable to see another solution. Parents will do almost anything to protect their children and Sethe is no exception. All of Sethe's experiences throughout slavery are representations of life for all slaves. Morrison's depictions of rape and abuse accurately portray the damaging effects that slavery had on those who were forced to carry its burden. While we must consider Sethe's traumatic past, we must also look at her affects on those around her. Paul D, Denver, and Beloved all suffered because of their relationship with Sethe. Paul D becomes a victim of rape at the hands of Beloved, and his connection to Sethe is what links him to Beloved. Denver has never had the intimate connection that has long been needed in order for her life to have a sense of fulfillment. Sethe's focus on Beloved, damages her connection with Denver, because Denver does share the same bond that she and Beloved do. Beloved suffered both physically and psychologically at the hands of Sethe, by being killed in order to ensure her protection. In doing so, she prevented Beloved from ever having a true identity. She was never able to have the connection with her mother that is necessary for child development. Beloved comes back into Sethe's life as a grown woman, but because of her past, she still holds the mentality of a small

child. Sethe's actions create psychological repercussions for everyone who remains a part of her life. Morrison does an excellent job of portraying the horrors of slavery through her characters. It is important that we as readers understand the severity of the damage inflicted upon innocent victims. While Sethe has made those in her life victims of psychological repression, she is also a victim herself. We as readers must look at the importance of these characters' struggles and recognize them as the collective suffering of all slaves during the most difficult of times.

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