

A Web Case Book on BELOVED by Toni Morrison

© 2007 English Department, Millikin University, Decatur, IL

<http://www.millikin.edu/english/beloved/Lingren-newcrit-essay2.html>

**“Rememory” through Repetition and Revision:
Storytelling and Jazz Techniques as Narrative in Toni Morrison’s Beloved**

by Allison Lingren

“Anything dead coming back to life hurts.”
-Amy (Morrison, 42)

Amy, the white girl who encountered Sethe as she fled from Sweet Home, imparted this “truth for all times” (Morrison 42) as she massaged Sethe’s swollen feet and legs back to living limbs. However, in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, it is not only the dead who hurt as they come back to life. Though Beloved, the assumed reincarnation of the spirit of Sethe’s two-year-old baby girl, certainly suffers pain as she comes back to life, some of the ‘living’ characters in the novel, especially Sethe and Denver, also feel the pangs of the dead returning to life.

Sethe and Denver are burdened with histories and ‘rememories’ that keep them chained to the past. Both women relive these memories frequently, though Sethe would like to forget her past and Denver clings to the few stories of her early life that she’s been given. However, neither woman can find a way to revisit these memories and then be at peace with them. This struggle is magnified by the verb tense used throughout the majority of the novel - unable to escape their haunting pasts, the prose of their present is also written in past tense.

After Beloved, a truly ‘haunting’ aspect of Sethe and Denver’s pasts, appears on the stump outside of 124, she begins to take these memories from them and helps the women reinvent them. After Beloved has helped Denver revise the story of her birth (Morrison 91), Denver narrates a brief section in which she experiences her fear that Beloved will leave her in the present tense (Morrison 142). This new ability to shift tenses suggests that Denver has begun to deal with her history in a way that will some day allow her to live fully in the present.

Because a large portion of the action of Beloved occurs through this revising and retelling of past events, it seems fitting that the style of narration used throughout the novel is based on repetition and revision. The repetition of motives, stories, and themes within Beloved and the constant revision of characters' "rememories" can be linked to the musical traditions of jazz and the tradition of oral story-telling. The revision of these "rememories" and their absorption by Beloved slowly leads toward the exorcism of Beloved and her pregnant belly, swollen with the painful stories of the enslaved. The revision of the most heart-wrenching memories of Sethe and Denver's lives lead to the constant presence of the present tense in the penultimate chapter.

In her article, "Beyond the "Literary Habit": Oral Tradition and Jazz in *Beloved*", Cheryl Hall argues that the narrative style of the novel emulates the circulation of a story passed down through generations.

Stories in oral cultures serve many of the same purposes as the repeated stories in Beloved: the transmission of historical data, the preservation of cultural values and ideas, the education and entertainment of children (and adults). The knowledge transmitted is not static, however, though essential details may be retained. It is enriched and modified with every telling, and by each different storyteller. Tales are told over and over again, as often as they are called for by the listeners, or as often as the (actual or ceremonial) need for their telling occurs. (Hall 92)

Hall uses the story of Denver's birth as an example of a story "enriched and modified" by multiple tellings. The story, which is told twice in the novel, has Denver as the narrator on both occasions. However, the first time, Denver tells it to herself, as a way of giving comfort. "And the story that she recounts seems to have been handed down straight from her mother" (Wolfe 268). This version focuses on details that seem out-of-place in a story about a birth – Sethe's swollen feet, images of the afterlife – and is abruptly ended before Denver is born, by thoughts of the white dress Denver had seen through the window, standing next to her praying mother.

When Denver revisits the story, it moves from a mere recitation to a narrative performance (Wolfe 268), for and with Beloved, who is eager to hear and absorb the story.

Now, watching Beloved's alert and hungry face, how she took in every word, asking questions about the color of things and their size, her downright craving to know, Denver began to see what she was saying and not just hear it: there is this nineteen-year-old slavegirl – a year older than herself – walking through the dark woods to get to her children who are far away. She is tired, scared maybe, and maybe even lost. (...) Behind her dogs, perhaps; guns probably; and certainly mossy teeth. (Morrison 91)

Up to this point, Denver has not even used the present tense to describe her present actions, but now she is able to tell her birth story in this way, because she is actually experiencing it, for the first time. She is driven to this point by Beloved's hunger for the story, and she feeds Beloved's hunger "by giving blood to the scraps her mother and

grandmother had told her – and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together” (Morrison 92). In this instance, the text itself suggests the connection between oral storytelling and music, referring to *Beloved* and Denver’s partnership as a ‘duet.’

While enrichment and modification are characteristics of oral storytelling, they are also a part of the jazz tradition. The two versions of Denver’s birth story are like a theme and variation – Sethe’s version is the theme, to which Denver adds her own variation, giving it “blood” and “a heartbeat” (Morrison 92) by adding details, invented by Denver, that change the tone and focus of the theme. Invention is the essential ingredient of a musical variation. For instance, in Denver’s variation, Amy has “fugitive eyes” (Morrison 92), which suggests that they would be quick and darting; in Sethe’s theme, Amy’s eyes are “Slow-moving eyes. She didn’t look at anything quick” (Morrison 39). However, in a latter portion of Denver’s version of the story, Amy’s eyes are “slow-moving” (Morrison 95) again – a return to tonic after a brief excursion on the blues scale.

There are other connecting factors between the theme and variation: Amy comments on pain being necessary for healing in both versions, and Denver elaborates and improvises a monologue for Amy on the shape of the scars on her mother’s back. Early in the novel, when Paul D. first arrives, Sethe tells him that a “whitegirl” had told her that there was a chokecherry tree on her back (Morrison 18). However, she never acknowledges that it was the “whitegirl” who helped her escape and give birth to Denver, and it isn’t mentioned at all in the first version of Denver’s birth story. Like any good jazz musician, Denver took what she had heard in another story and tied it into her birth story, elaborating on it until it became a full musical phrase. Also, in both versions of the story, Sethe is running from “mossy teeth” (Morrison 38, 91). Sethe uses this phrase to refer to the white men who nursed her and took her milk at Sweet Home, but it seems unlikely that Denver would have heard the phrase in that context. This suggests that Sethe also is a part of the performance – some of her original phrases are still used, since she is the only one who knows what really happened.

However, there are some elements of the narrative performance that seem to belong solely to its immediate participants. Denver’s fears and *Beloved*’s scant knowledge of language creep into their revision of the story, like a signature riff or mode. Incomplete sentences like “Whose baby that?” seem to be more along the lines of *Beloved*’s thought process than Denver’s, while Denver’s childhood fear of her mother chopping off her head when she plaited her hair (Morrison 243) finds its way into the story through Amy’s threat that Sethe’s head will be cut off if she is discovered.

Another example of theme and variation within the narrative style of *Beloved* is the latter section of Part II. For twenty pages, the “unspeakable thoughts” (Morrison 235) of the women of 124 are spoken. Because these twenty pages seem to merge the gap between prose and poetry, the language of music seems the most appropriate way to describe the interplay between the thoughts of the three women of 124.

The section begins with individual monologues from the women. Sethe and Denver address their thoughts to Beloved, but even their thoughts are expressed in the past tense (Morrison 236-247). Both women begin their thoughts with a variation on the theme “I am Beloved and she is mine” (Morrison 248). This group of theme and variations is somewhat strange, because the theme is presented after its variations. When the theme is finally presented by Beloved, the prose moves into present tense. However, before the consciousnesses of the three women can begin to intertwine, Beloved is forced to leave her stream-of-consciousness thought, go back into the past tense, and speak of the day she was murdered (Morrison 253).

After Beloved’s variation on her own theme (her journey into past tense), the three women engage in the “call and response” form of a jam session (Hall 94). They ask and answer the questions that are closest to their hearts, speaking in the simplest of sentences. They draw their “riffs” from themes previously presented and put their own individual sound into it. The result is a “meshing of their solo efforts (...), a complex cacophony of sound” (Hall 94). Together, they move through the past: “Where are your earrings?/They took them from me”; the present: “I am loving her too much” “You are mine”; and surprisingly, even the future: “I will make you a round basket” “You will never leave me again” (Morrison 254-256). This joint venture toward the present, and even a future, suggests that though Beloved initially had to revert to the past tense to connect with her mother and sister, she is now able to move them forward. In their monologues, Sethe had acknowledged her guilt and Denver had expressed her fears, which still surface as they begin to merge their thoughts with Beloved’s consciousness in the “jam session,” but at less frequent intervals.

There are several symbols that reoccur, like musical motives, throughout the novel and connect the “rememories” and thoughts of Sethe, Paul D., and Stamp Paid. One of the most frequently referenced motives is trees. For example, when Sethe and Paul D. are reuniting at the beginning of the novel, Sethe tells him that she has a tree on her back (Morrison, 18). This refers both to the chokecherry tree of scars and also to the cross she must bear, which hints at her guilt and explains the presence of the ghost of her baby.

Trees continue to represent oppression throughout the novel. Amy referred to the chokecherry tree as being “planted” (Morrison 94) by the whiteman who whipped Sethe. This image corresponds with Stamp Paid’s idea of the “jungle” within black people that was planted by the fear of the whites (Morrison 234). Stamp Paid believes that the jungle grew because “coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human” (Morrison 234), until the jungle spread to the white people who had created the jungle within slaves in the first place. The jungle rages within both races, but the whites are too afraid of the jungle they’ve created to see the resemblance.

Trees also are used to describe the divide between Paul D. and Sethe after he discovers the secrets of her past. The moment that he informs her that she has “two feet, not four” (Morrison 194), “a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet” (Morrison 194).

They have reached an emotional place where they cannot reach each other until they have fought through their own, personal forests.

The division that the “Schoolteacher” sees between the “human” and “animal” characteristics of his slaves is another motive that appears outside of Sethe’s “rememory” of overhearing the men’s discussion of her divided characteristics. This comparison of animal behavior to human actions is found in the description of Sethe’s reactions to threats made toward her “best thing” (Morrison 321).

Twice, Sethe reacts to the presence of a white man with the natural instinct of protecting her children. The first time, she tries to do the hurting before the white man can; the second time, she attacks the source of the perceived threat – Edward Bodwin. Because she does not act rationally while she is trying to protect her children, her thought process during these moments is portrayed as closer to that of a creature who reacts with her gut.

In both instances, it is clear that Sethe is not thinking rationally. Both times, she feels the same “hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings (Morrison 192, 308).” The only difference between this phrase in the two separate occurrences is that the “rememory” of Beloved’s death is told in the past tense, while Sethe’s consciousness shifts abruptly to present tense as she loses control of rational thought at the end of the novel. In both instances, “if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono” (Morrison 309). In both circumstances she is described as having characteristics of a bird: “she just flew” (Morrison 192), “She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand” (Morrison 309). The frenzied panic that a threat to her children by white men creates causes her to react instinctually, like a mother bird.

When Edward Bodwin drives to 124 in his carriage, he sets in motion the final recapitulation of a main theme of the novel, Beloved’s murder. This reenactment of the events that led to Beloved’s murder may be the reason why Beloved disappears. Once the memory most important to her is revised, with her mother attacking the (in this case, perceived) threat, instead of her, it seems that Beloved is able to let go and leave the residents of 124 to live in the present. She also takes the contents of her pregnant belly, which contains all of the painful stories told to her by Sethe and Denver, before the contents can escape to become an even more grotesque manifestation of the suffering of the enslaved.

Though the revision of Beloved’s murder helps to exorcise her, there is another revision that also may have contributed to her disappearance. In the scene where Beloved, Denver, and Sethe go ice skating, the phrase “Nobody saw them falling” (Morrison 205, 206) is repeated three times. This refers not only to their stumbles while ice skating, but also to the blind eye turned by blacks and whites alike after Sethe killed Beloved. In the reenactment of Beloved’s murder, not only is the chorus of black women looking at Beloved, but so is Edward Bodwin. As he approaches, Beloved sees “A hill of black people, falling. And above them all, rising from his place with a whip in his hand, a man without skin, looking. He is looking at her” (Morrison 309). Perhaps Beloved is able to

disappear because she knows that she has been seen and that a white person has seen her family falling.

However, if *Beloved* somehow had hopes that all of these eye-witnesses would cause her to be remembered, she was mistaken. The penultimate chapter, which deals with the promise of Denver's future and Paul D.'s return to a broken Sethe, is written completely in present tense prose, a first for the entire novel. The last chapter begins in present tense, but reverts to past tense when it is revealed that no one remembers *Beloved*, that she has been forgotten, "like a bad dream" (Morrison 323).

This shift in tense is introduced by a phrase that becomes the last repetition and revision of the novel. It is repeated three times, and moves from past to present tense: "It was not a story to pass on/ It was not a story to pass on/ This is not a story to pass on" (Morrison 323-324). Joanna Wolfe suggests that the repeated phrase serves like the refrain of a song (Wolfe 278). Each repeat of the refrain can be interpreted differently: perhaps the first is advising the reader that this story should not be retold, while the second is saying that it can not be overlooked. The third repetition, with the shift of tenses, is the most ambiguous, but the line that comes directly before it is "They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do" (Morrison 324). This line brings the previous meanings of the refrain together: the characters of the novel could remember *Beloved* if they wanted, but her memory brings up so many new, painful memories that if they did "remember" her, they might revert to the kind of lives they were leading before she came – a life too connected with the past. Therefore, the last refrain leaves us with a deceptive cadence, a line that sounds like the conclusion of something important, but is really just leading the reader onto a bigger, more final cadence, which is, "*Beloved*" (Morrison 324).

Works Cited & Consulted

- Berret, Anthony J. "Toni Morrison's Literary Jazz." *College Language Association Journal* 32.3 (March 1989): 267-83.
- Eppert, Claudia. "Histories Re-imagined, Forgotten, and Forgiven: student responses to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Changing English: Studies in Reading and Culture* 10.2 (October 2003): 185-194. Academic Search Premiere. Millikin University, Decatur, IL. 14 November 2007.
- Hall, Cheryl. "Beyond the 'literary habit': Oral tradition and jazz in *Beloved*." *MELUS* 19.1 (Spring 1994): 89-96. Academic Search Premiere. Millikin University, Decatur, IL. 19 November 2007.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1987.
- Wolfe, Joanna. "'Ten minutes for Seven Letters': Song as Key to Narrative Revision in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Narrative* 12.3 (Oct. 2004): 263-280. Academic Search Premiere. Millikin University, Decatur, IL. 14 November 2007.
- Solomon, Barbara, ed. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*. New York: G.K. Hall; London: Prentice Hall International, 1998.