

A Web Case Book on BELOVED by Toni Morrison

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Binaries in *Beloved*

by

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Dualities are central to every aspect of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Throughout the novel, many things are set up in opposition to each other: characters, concepts of gender, ideas of time. Morrison sets up binaries for the purpose of displaying the complexity of not only the antebellum African-American experience, but also of life in general. For example, the title character can be viewed in a variety of ways when compared to another singular character. Beloved is in opposition to nearly every other character in the novel, including Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and even herself. The reactions and interactions of these characters with Beloved each reveal a different aspect of her identity. When analyzing Beloved from the perspective of Paul D, for example, the reader sees a hostile little girl. However, when analyzing Beloved from Sethe's point of view, one sees Beloved a sympathetic, confused character. Still, when analyzing Beloved through Denver's eyes, Beloved seems to be a jealous, childish character. Along the way, Morrison sets up other binaries as a byproduct of these character binaries: male and female, and past and present. By analyzing these binaries and the ways they work against each other, one can see *Beloved* as a novel of great complexity trying to explain the great complexity of the American experience. Beloved, to Morrison, is an expression of the complexity of the African-American life in post-Civil War America.

The complexity of life in America is exemplified by the character Beloved because she represents something different to the reader when set up as a binary against another character. For example, Beloved appears to be a spoiled brat when situated against Paul D. His first reaction or thought to Beloved is indicative of this: "Paul D wondered at the newness of her shoes" (Morrison 53). This first reaction to the appearance of this strange new character is telling of Paul D's skepticism at the girl. Again, Paul D's reaction appears to be hostile and portrays Beloved in a negative light: "Paul D said it made him

sick to his stomach” (Morrison 55). Beloved challenges Paul D’s position as “man of the house.” Knowledgeable about Beloved’s past, Paul D is threatened by Beloved because she is a part of Sethe’s past as a mother: “In *Beloved*, however, motherhood or matriarchy tears down the negative, only to build a more positive black male image. In other words, the presence of mother hood and images related to it constitute rebirth for the black male figure” (Watson 162). Watson’s use of the word “rebirth” is interesting; Paul D is threatened by Beloved not only because of his fear of Sethe’s past, but also because of the way it changes his status in the household. His rebirth is under Sethe’s lead; in other words, he becomes “below” Sethe because he is essentially turned into one of her children. Consequently, Paul D’s attitude toward Beloved is hostile and he portrays her negatively. Beloved also challenges Paul D’s identity as a male when he sees her displaying fawning attention, but not toward him: “Beloved was shining and Paul D didn’t like it” (Morrison 64). Paul D does not comprehend why a girl would be “shining” but not toward him. Not only does he not understand it, but it calls into question his manhood (being the only man present in the house). As Corey intuits, “For Sethe and Paul D, Beloved serves as a catalyst to awaken their emotions and memories, but she also arouses their fears” (39). Paul D’s portrayal of Beloved as an unwelcome addition to the house is a result of her threatening his role as a male.

Paul D’s and Sethe’s burgeoning relationship is quickly halted as soon as Beloved returns to the house. However, whereas Paul D reacts negatively toward Beloved, Sethe attempts to win the love of the child and the child is portrayed as a nice, albeit obsessive child. One of the first instances of an interaction between the two characters portrays her in this light: “Rain water held on to pine needles for dear life and Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe” (Morrison 57). This metaphor is appropriate for their relationship: rain (Beloved) needs to serve the pine needles (Sethe). In *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle*, Grewal says, “Infanticide, Sethe’s raw act of defiance, runs counter to the slave community’s response of resistance, namely their determined effort to keep family ties *alive* despite the master’s attempt to sunder them” (97). In a way, Beloved is part of this community. She desires to understand the actions of her mother, and Sethe knows this. “...their two shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords” (Morrison 57). Beloved and Sethe both have a desire to reconcile the past that connects them, and the image of the two shadows clashing exemplifies their relationship. Each appears to be kind to the other, but out of a desire to simply understand. Later in the novel, the narrator says:

It became a way to feed her. Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. (Morrison 58)

Beloved and Sethe desire to be at peace with each other, which casts Beloved in a sympathetic light. As Betty Jane Powell says, “Beloved engages in a never-ending struggle to attain cohesion” (144). Beloved, when analyzed under the guise of Sethe, is a sweet child who needs to understand.

Along with Sethe and Paul D, Morrison also sets up Beloved's character in opposition to her sister, Denver. The purpose in doing this is to portray Beloved on the same level as Denver—that is, as someone who rightfully desires attention. Their interactions together are similar to Beloved and Sethe's, but Denver acts in Beloved's role, asking Beloved questions and trying to understand her. Denver says, "What's it like over there, where you were before? Can you tell me?" (Morrison 75). This question implies not only a desire to understand where Beloved came from, but also to understand the nature of their relationship. In his essay, Rafael Perez-Torres says, "The relation of Sethe's story opens between her, Beloved and Denver channels of exchange (aesthetic, social, personal)" (95). Beloved and Denver both desire to understand their mother and bond over this. This is also exemplified in Denver's chapter toward the end of the novel: "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (Morrison 205). This is important because it symbolically explains the bond Denver and Beloved have. Denver's nourishment was accompanied with the sorrow of the loss of her sister. Denver is also similar to Beloved in that she attempts to, but cannot, understand her mother's actions: "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it" (205). Denver feels not only for Beloved, but also is afraid of Sethe because of Beloved and what happened to her. Beloved is portrayed as similar to Denver when set up in opposition to her, which adds further complexity to her character.

In such a complex novel as *Beloved*, it is possible for a character to be set up in opposition to herself. Of course, the character to do this would be Beloved. Beloved is simultaneously an individual character, representing whatever actions or events are happening to her in the present, and also a representation of the slave experience. Beloved's binary is set up in the final part of the book, in the chapters beginning with "I am Beloved..." The first chapter portrays Beloved as the representative for the entire slave experience. Beloved says, "there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead" (Morrison 211). This is clearly a depiction of a slave experience, and Beloved is describing it through her point of view. Again in this section: "I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink" (Morrison 211). The "men without skin" are the white masters, and Beloved depicts them from the point of view of all slaves. In reading Morrison's novels, Karla Holloway says, "A part of me knows them well, not simply through having heard them before, but through some type of familial memory that allows all women to share" (149). This is the same concept at work with Beloved representing the slave experience; she represents all of them. In the next chapter, however, Beloved narrates from her present perspective (her desire to reconcile her and Sethe's past). Beloved says, "I lost her again, but I found the house she whispered to me and there she was, smiling at last" (Morrison 214). This is clearly discussing the events that are happening to Beloved and Sethe in the beginning. How is it possible for Beloved to be a living character dealing with present issues and simultaneously represent the pasts of millions? This binary is set up by Morrison to prove the complexity of the slave experience, and its affect on the present. Symbolically, Beloved represents a thematic binary of *Beloved*: the bridge between past and present.

Beloved is not the only character who is set up as a binary to other characters. Paul D and Denver also represent a binary in the novel: they representative of the past-present binary to Sethe. Paul D, to Sethe, represents the past. Perhaps this is why Sethe and Paul D have so much trouble in their relationship. The narrator says, “To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (Morrison 42). How can she have a relationship with someone who epitomizes the aspect of her life she desires to forget? In the next paragraph, the narrator applies the situation to Denver: “As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered” (Morrison 42). So, Denver represents the present that she hopes to keep Paul D (the past) from obtaining. It is impossible for Sethe to maintain both of these positions (past and present/Paul D and Denver), so tension arises between the two. Caroline Rody says, “Together, Sethe and Paul D begin a mutual talking cure that promises a mutual future” (91). Where does this leave, Denver, then? Denver suspects this dilemma and reacts violently toward Paul D: “Denver ran a mighty interference and on the third day flat-out asked Paul D how long he was going to hang around” (Morrison 43). This is indicative of the past-present binary represented by the two characters: the present asks the past how long it intends to “hang around.” Sethe, who is somewhere in between past and present, lashes out on Denver: “Hush! *You* make tracks. Go somewhere and sit down” (Morrison 43). It is easy to understand Denver’s frustration. She is set aside the moment that Paul D enters back into Sethe’s life. Paul D also feels neglected because of Denver’s reaction to his arrival: “Maybe I should make tracks” (Morrison 43). Paul D and Denver, the past and the present, struggle to get along with each other and reconcile themselves with Sethe.

Along with Denver and Paul D being representative binaries, there is a thematic binary in *Beloved* in the form of female and male. Sethe and Paul D’s relationship can be used to explore this binary. When Paul D first arrives at 124, he becomes in command of the household. The narrator says, “With a table and a loud male voice he had rid 124 of its claim to local fame” (Morrison 37). The use of the word “male” as an adjective is an interesting choice and implies that a male voice was needed to rid the house of its demons. Again, Sethe is set up as being weaker than Paul D:

It became his room and Sethe didn’t object—her bed for two had been occupied by one for eighteen years before Paul D came to call. And maybe it was better this way, with young girls in the house and him not being her true-to-life husband. In any case, since there was no reduction in his before-breakfast or after-supper appetites, he never heard her complain. (Morrison 115)

This is indicative of an uncommunicative relationship. Consequently, the binary remains in tact, despite the fact that Paul D and Sethe are technically in a relationship. The male/female binary is established by their lack of communication and understanding. Paul D also views his opposite as other. Early in the novel, the narrator says, “The jump, thought Paul D, from a calf to a girl wasn’t all that mighty” (Morrison 26). This sort of rhetoric is indicative of an attitude dismissive of the second half of the binary. So, when Paul D is overturned in the house (by the presence of Beloved—a female), his concept of his manhood is somewhat shattered. Watson says, “Paul D rides into Sethe’s life on a horse created by a white man’s version of manhood, so it is no surprise when Paul comes,

metaphorically, tumbling down from this ‘horse’” (163). Paul D, although his sense of manhood is broken, attempts to take it back with his constant battle with Beloved and for Sethe. Watson says,

At points Paul D tries to gain and retain some sense of power over Sethe’s motherhood, which is symbolized by his attempts to cup Sethe’s breasts in his hands, breasts that once gave milk to the vengeful baby spirit. His feeble attempts come soon after Sethe tells her story of how her milk was stolen during rape... (164)

Instead of trying to help Sethe cope, or reconcile with her past, Paul D seizes the opportunity to gain ground in the struggle for power in the house, which further establishes the male/female binary. Concepts of masculinity and femininity are explored and set up in opposition to each other in *Beloved*.

The final binary set up by Morrison in the novel is also thematic in nature: positive and negative portrayals of the past. Central to the novel’s concept, the past plays an integral role in each of the character’s lives. Each of the characters attempts to understand the nature of time. Sethe seems to run from the past. The narrator constantly portrays Sethe as “beating back the past” (Morrison 73). This attitude is also exemplified when she says,

No thank you. I don’t want to know or to have to remember that. I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness not to speak of love. (Morrison 70).

Sethe does not want to think about the past because it is a time she would rather forget. Beloved, on the other hand, is almost obsessed with discovering her (and her mother’s) past. When Beloved enters 124, Sethe discovers “the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling” (58). Beloved constantly inquires about Sethe’s past in order to understand why her mother killed her. Beloved’s fascination with the past is set up in opposition to Sethe’s desire to forget about it. Beloved’s and Sethe’s problems in their relationship arise from this philosophical difference. Still, Sethe believes in the past just as much as Beloved:

I used to think it was my rememory. You know, Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If A house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and Not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. (Morrison 36)

This is why Sethe fears the past; she recognizes that it has the capability to live in the present. Beloved is the physical representation of this concept. Beloved and Sethe represent different attitudes toward the past, and they attempt to reconcile these concepts throughout the novel.

The binaries mentioned in here are provided to demonstrate the complexity of *Beloved*, just as they are provided in the novel to demonstrate the complexity of the slave experience. What we learn from *Beloved* is that present, past, and future are not separate but that they all bleed into each other. They are fragments molded together by time. Likewise, it is possible for characters to represent different things when they interact with different people. Who Beloved is is different depending on who she is interacting with:

whether it be Sethe, Paul D, or Denver. This is not to say that *Beloved* is a poorly-developed character. Rather, it is the opposite: *Beloved* is an accurate depiction of a human life, for she is incredibly complex. The same is true of the other characters and concepts in the novel. *Beloved* uses binaries to help us attempt to understand the sheer complexity of our pasts.

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