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Examining the Effects of Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Slavery is a part of our history that no one wants to remember. In an interview with Bonnie Angelo, Toni Morrison said of her novel *Beloved*, "I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember" (Angelo). Morrison struggled when writing *Beloved* with the natural "tension between needing to bury the past and needing to revive it," as put by Ashraf Rushdy in "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (39). The characters in *Beloved* feel this dual need, especially Sethe, who wants to forget what she did but knows she cannot, who longs to have her daughter with her again. Nicole M. Coonradt in "To Be Loved: Amy Denver And Human Need-Bridges To Understanding In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" says, "As her characters' lives are shattered as a result of their slave experience, so too are their stories. By piecing them together, a clearer, more complete version of their painful history emerges" (171). All the characters in this work are influenced by slavery, and we see its effects through Morrison's retrieved history, by examining the actions of the characters and relationships among the characters—especially the mother-daughter relationship between Sethe and her daughters—we are shown how to remember the sordid past of slavery.

In "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Remembering the Body as Historical Text," Mae G. Henderson says "The challenge of the illiterate slave is... to discover a way of organizing

memory, of contriving a narrative configuration in the absence of written records” (85).

Morrison’s vision of memory in *Beloved* can interact with the present. This idea from *Beloved* brings the work close to the realm of science fiction: As Sethe explains, “Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory.... But it’s not. Places, places are still there.... [N]ot just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (Morrison 43). In the context of this novel, when one visits a place where something significant happened, where a lot of emotions were felt, one can feel them. Linda Krumholz in “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” develops a lesson out of this idea of encountering the past in the present, saying that it represents “a model for the readers who must confront Sethe's past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right here where we live” (108). We must confront our nation’s sordid history, in spite of the lack of first-hand records from the oppressed, the slaves. We do this by imagining what it must have been like, and when we do the effect will be so strong it is almost tangible, almost as though it is happening again. We imagine by placing ourselves in the world of these characters; through them, we will be able to perceive slavery and its effects. We do this because we ultimately must forget; but if we try to forget this without first re-experiencing the tragedy, we have not eliminated the anguish the memory of the past brings us—this is Sethe’s lesson.

The relationships between Sethe and Beloved, the ghost of the daughter she killed rather than have her return to be a slave, as well as between Sethe and Denver, her daughter who lived, are defined by Teresa Washington in “The Mother-Daughter “Àjé” Relationship In Toni Morrison's "Beloved" with a word from the Yoruba language: “Àjé is a Yoruba word and concept that describes a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in Africana women.... Àjé are astrally-inclined human beings who enforce earthly and cosmic laws, and they keep society

balanced by ensuring that human beings follow those laws or are punished for their transgressions” (Washington 171). Sethe could not ensure that those earthly laws were followed by the slave-holding community. Her actions as an *ajé* to reestablish the balance resulted in the death of her daughter: she needed to save her daughter from the chaos brought on by injustice, an act Washington calls “the most profound expression of devotion” (Washington 177).

If all the characters personify an aspect of slavery’s effects, Beloved is the epitomizing character. According to Marsha Darling in "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," Beloved is “literally... what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead.... She is also another kind of dead that is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from the true, factual slave ship” (Darling 247). Amy Denver, a white indentured servant, gives insight into the nature of Beloved when she says “Can’t nothing heal without pain” (92). Without pain, Beloved also cannot heal from the wounds inflicted on her by her mother. Krumholz says that “Beloved makes this maxim [of healing and pain] literal, as the physical manifestation of suppressed memories” (114). The suppressed memories hurt when you remember them. Beloved, to the reader, represents the memories and history of slavery. Speaking of Sethe's declaration, “Beloved, she my daughter” (Morrison 236), Carly Holloway in “*Beloved: A Spiritual*” says Sethe is trying to reconcile herself with her daughter, “as if the vitality of her description would defy the dying and killing” (71). It is in the first-person poetic discourse from which that quote appears that we see truly stated Sethe’s wish that she had had more hope, that she had refrained from killing her daughter; only this time she is entering denial, believing or desperately wanting to believe that since Beloved is alive again, she never killed her in the first place; as Sethe says, “[b]ut my love was tough and she back now” (Morrison 236).

Rushdy adds to the significance of Beloved, saying she is “the incarnated memory of

Sethe's guilt... nothing but guilt, a symbol of an unrelenting criticism of the dehumanizing function of the institution of slavery” (47). Beloved is the guilt that remembering brings, not just for Sethe but for everyone who remembers the enslavement of the African people. Sethe kills her "crawling already?" (Morrison 110) daughter because she did not think the baby could be saved from a life of slavery, but it was not long after Sethe was recaptured that she herself was freed again. If she had known her daughter would not live her life enslaved, she surely would not have killed her, and it is this knowledge that brings the keenest guilt. How can one not feel empathy for Sethe, whose waking thought can only be, “If only I had known”? If Sethe had only a little more hope, then her “crawling already?” daughter would still be alive; Sethe would not be so haunted by the effects of slavery. Morrison is telling us we feel empathy keenly when we have similar regrets – and we will heal by facing them.

Sethe’s other daughter Denver personifies Sethe’s lack of hope, as the daughter who was taken from “the arc of its mother’s swing” (Morrison 175). Yet, says Rushdy, “Denver becomes the daughter of hope” (48). Because she survives, she is not only Sethe’s joy, but in that joy a reminder of what she could have had. She could have had both daughters. Denver personifies Sethe’s wish that she had taken care of the infant daughter she later named Beloved in that Denver cares for and feels a duty to protect the Beloved who later appears at 124: “ready for me to protect her,” she says of her sister (243). In the first-person portion of the novel, Denver’s discourse reflects Sethe’s, with a “technique of repetition that functions as a recursion strategy” (Holloway 71). Both parties remember the same thing from different perspectives in those discourses. Denver begins her narrative in the same way as Sethe: “Beloved is my sister” (Morrison 242). The main point of her narrative is that she worries that Sethe might one day do to her what she did to Beloved: kill her, and she wants to protect her sister from that very thing

happening again. This is in line with the definition of an Ajé: Denver does not want any more injustice to come to Beloved. She protects her for when Sethe can remember her, and plans then to either protect her from Sethe, or find relief when she sees Sethe will never bring either of them to harm. Finding that relief is Denver's ultimate wish.

The two perspectives, revealed in Sethe's and Denver's discourses, are shown to be similar in order to highlight Beloved's discourse as starkly different. Beloved "disrupt[s] what semblance of narrative structure or sense there had been in Sethe's or Denver's thinking. But her discourse also supports the narrative because her dialogue accomplishes the same kind of disruption that her presence actualized" (Holloway 72). Whatever reason Beloved had for returning, she distorts the lives of those to whom she returned. Beloved's discourse contrasts with theirs most prominently in that it is mysterious and senseless, but it is clear that she longs to be with Sethe: "her smiling face is the place for me" (Morrison 252), says Beloved.

Krumholz speaks very specifically on slavery's influence in the novel. She says the novel can be read as a ritual, and she calls it a ritual for healing—but Beloved does not aid this healing; she disrupts it. However, in doing so, she "catalyzes the healing process for the characters and for the reader; thus, she is a disruption necessary for healing" (110).

It is not Morrison's goal to condemn slave holders, much less to be prejudiced against "whitefolk". The hope for the death of prejudice is seen in the white indentured servant Amy Denver. Nicole M. Coonradt points out the etymology of Amy is "from the Old French 'Aimee,' in use since the twelfth century, derive[d] from the Latin *amatus* (loved), and literally means 'beloved'" (170). Coonradt comes to the conclusion that, through Amy, we learn "Christian charity is colorblind, and in the love that is charity, hope resides" (183). Amy was not much different from a slave, being an indentured servant; as such, she is the perfect catalyst to mold

Sethe's and Denver's ideas about Caucasians, to move it a little bit further from Baby Suggs' idea that "[t]here is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (Morrison 105). Amy has also been directly impacted by slavery; she longs to escape, and helps Sethe go ahead of her. Amy Denver symbolizes hope, as does Sethe's Denver. Amy symbolizes the hope that slavery and prejudice will one day be eradicated.

The memories, which Beloved represents, hurt, but those memories are the way Beloved returns. It is suggested that Sethe's "rememory" provided a way for Beloved to return, seen when Denver says, upon hearing Sethe explain "rememory", "that must mean nothing ever dies," to which Sethe responds, "Nothing ever does" (44). Denver has just pointed out that Beloved is that memory, because "rememory" brings the past into the present, and Beloved has returned from the dead. Rushdy brings this idea a step further, saying Beloved "symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried, properly" (Rushdy 41). In being a memory, she directly causes Sethe to confront her actions, ultimately aiding her in burying her past. We see Beloved buried when she is forgotten; when Sethe finally realizes she does not need to remember anymore, because she "need[s] some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison 322), she needs to focus on the future. Finally, we see why we need to remember in order to forget.

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