After publishing four novels, Toni Morrison had already established herself as one of the most popular and successful black female writers of her time. With the publication of her fifth novel, *Beloved*, however, critics worldwide recognized that here was an author with a depth and brilliance that made her work universal. In this tale set in Reconstruction Ohio, Morrison paints a dark and powerful portrait of the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Inspired by an actual historical incident, *Beloved* tells the story of a woman haunted by the daughter she murdered rather than have returned to slavery. Part ghost story, part realistic narrative, the novel examines the mental and physical trauma caused by slavery as well as the lingering damage inflicted on its survivors. In prose both stark and lyrical, Morrison addresses several of her enduring themes: the importance of family and community, the quest for individual and cultural identity, and the very nature of humanity.

Although *Beloved* was hailed by many reviewers as a masterpiece when it first appeared in 1987, the novel inspired considerable controversy several months after its publication. After it failed to win either the National Book Award or the National Book Critics Circle Award, accusations of racism were leveled. Demonstrating their support of the author, forty-eight prominent black writers and critics signed a tribute to Morrison’s career and published it in the January 24, 1988 edition of the *New York Times Book Review*. *Beloved* subsequently won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and the...
secretary of the jury addressed the issue by stating that it "would be unfortunate if anyone diluted the value of Toni Morrison’s achievement by suggesting that her prize rested on anything but merit.” Despite the controversy, few have contested the excellence of the novel, and *Beloved* remains one of the author’s most celebrated and analyzed works. As critic John Leonard concluded in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, the novel “belongs on the highest shelf of American literature, even if half a dozen canonized white boys have to be elbowed off…. Without *Beloved* our imagination of the nation’s self has a hole in it big enough to die from.”

**Author Biography**

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. Growing up during the Depression, Morrison witnessed the struggle of her parents, George and Ramah Wills Wofford, as they worked multiple jobs to support their four children. In the face of hard and often demeaning work, her parents held on to a sense of pride and self-respect which they passed on to their children. Because of their experiences with racism, they also emphasized the value and strength of African-American individuals, families, and communities. Music and storytelling were also valued in Morrison’s home, and dreams and ghostly apparitions were often featured in the stories people told each other. Reading was highly regarded in the family—one grandfather was a figure of respect because he had taught himself to read—and Morrison learned the skill at an early age. As she matured, Morrison became a capable student and read widely, from Russian novels to Jane Austen. While these works did not speak directly to her experience as a young black woman, they taught her about creating setting and atmosphere. As she told Jean Strouse in *Newsweek*: “I wasn’t thinking of writing then—I wanted to be a dancer like Maria Tallchief—but when I wrote my first novel years later, I wanted to capture that same specificity about the nature and feeling of the culture I grew up in.”

After high school, Morrison attended Howard University, where she studied English and classic literature in preparation for becoming a teacher. She graduated in 1953 and then enrolled in graduate school at Cornell University. After earning her master’s degree in 1955, she became an English instructor at Texas Southern and then Howard University. During this time the author met and married architect Harold Morrison, with whom she had two sons. After the marriage ended in divorce in 1964, Morrison moved to New York, where she worked as an editor with Random House. Although working in the publishing industry, it took her several tries to find a publisher for her first novel. When *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1969, reviews were generally positive and established the young author as one to watch. Her next works, *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977), fulfilled the promise of her early works. The former earned a nomination for the National Book Award, while the latter won the National Book Critics Circle Award and became the first work by a black author since Richard Wright’s *Native Son* to be a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Morrison was earning more than just critical acclaim, however. When her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, was published in 1981, it remained on bestseller lists for four months. Meanwhile, Morrison was still working at Random House, where she influenced several upcoming African-American writers. In addition to editing their works, she edited several nonfiction collections. While preparing the 1974 anthology *The Black Book*, Morrison came across the shocking but true story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who attempted to murder her children rather
than allow them to be captured and sent back into slavery. For the author, Garner’s story epitomized one of the chief horrors of slavery: the deliberate separation of families and the destruction of the bond between parent and child. Morrison used this story as a springboard for her novel *Beloved*, creating a haunting tale of the challenge of memory and the strength of family.

Morrison left publishing in 1985 for academia, and since 1989 has been the Robert F. Goheen Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University. In 1993 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, becoming the first African American and only the eighth woman to earn the accolade. The National Book Foundation similarly honored her in 1996 with its Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Morrison continues to teach, lecture, and write, attempting to create stories that have meaning for both author and reader. As she stated in *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation*, fiction “should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe.”

**Plot Summary**

**Part I**

In *Beloved*, Morrison chronicles the hardships Sethe and her family endure before, during, and after the American Civil War. The novel opens with a description of the “spiteful” atmosphere of 124 Bluestone Road in rural Ohio in 1873, where Sethe, her daughter Denver, and a troublesome spirit live. They are soon joined by two others: Paul D., who knew Sethe from their years as slaves on a Kentucky plantation, and a strange woman who calls herself Beloved. All quickly become caught up in the events in order to shield her daughter from the past. She tells Denver that when she ran away from Sweet Home, a white girl named Amy, also on the run, aided her delivery. Then a black man named Stamp Paid helped her get to Baby Suggs’ home where she was reunited with her children. When the schoolteacher, Sweet Home’s cruel overseer, found her there, she chose jail rather than a return to a life of slavery.

When Denver was seven, she suspected but refused to hear the complete truth about her dead sister and so encased herself in a silence “too solid for penetration” for the next two years. Sethe had left out of the story the details about how Beloved died. As they reminisce about the past, Sethe shows Paul her back, covered with scars that resemble a tree with many branches. After he responds sympathetically, the spirit begins to shake the house. When Paul smashes everything in the house, the spirit flees. Paul decides to stay and share Sethe’s bed, which upsets Denver, who wants all of her mother’s attention.

On their way home from a carnival, Sethe, Denver, and Paul find a sickly but well-dressed young woman named Beloved sitting near the steps of the house. They take her in and nurse her back to health. Denver feels a special patience with and possessiveness of this young woman whose illness seems to have erased the memory of her past. As she recovers, Beloved hovers around Sethe “like a familiar,” her eyes displaying a “bottomless longing.” Soon, against his will and in secret, Paul begins to have sex with Beloved after she comes to him one night.

One day Sethe takes Denver and Beloved with her to the Clearing in the woods, where Baby Suggs often preached and offered solace to black men, women, and children. In the Clearing, Sethe senses a strange connection between Beloved and her daughter, also named Beloved, who died soon after Denver’s birth. Sethe has told Denver only part of the story of her birth and the surrounding events in order to shield her daughter from the past. She tells Denver that when she ran away from Sweet Home, a white girl named Amy, also on the run, aided her delivery. Then a black man named Stamp Paid helped her get to Baby Suggs’ home where she was reunited with her children. When the schoolteacher, Sweet Home’s cruel overseer, found her there, she chose jail rather than a return to a life of slavery.
of her children, Beloved, before Stamp Paid was able to stop her.

Sethe tells the full story to Paul, including the details of what she suffered under the control of the schoolteacher at Sweet Home, after Stamp Paid shows him a newspaper clipping about the event, which he calls “the Misery.” She tries to explain to Paul that her great love for her children prompted her need to kill them so they would not have to suffer the horrors of slavery that she endured. Yet her story shocks Paul, who insists, “your love is too thick…. There could have been a way. Some other way…. You got two feet, Sethe, not four.” A distance immediately springs up between them, and Paul moves out.

Part II

Stamp feels “uneasy” ever since he told Paul about “the Misery.” Since that time, Sethe and Denver have been ostracized from the black community, due partly to the infanticide, but also to Sethe’s proud refusal to ask for help. When Stamp tries to visit Sethe, he hears “loud, urgent [voices], all speaking at once” coming from the house. He determines they are the voices of the suffering ghosts of blacks who have been killed by whites. No one comes to the door when Stamp knocks on it. After Paul left Bluestone Road, certain incidents prompted Sethe to determine that Beloved was the reincarnation of the daughter she lost, which initially fills her with joy and a sense of peace. She decides to cut herself off from the outside world that Paul had introduced her to and then closed off, and focus instead on her daughters and her hopes that her sons will return.

Stamp finds Paul living in the church basement and expresses regret that no one in the community offered him a place to stay. He tries to explain that Sethe’s actions resulted from her great love for her children and not from any mental imbalance. Paul admits, though, that he is afraid of her. When, despondent over the situation, he implores, “How much is a nigger supposed to take?” Stamp responds, “All he can.” Paul then cries out, “Why?”

Part III

At first Sethe, Denver, and Beloved played together, happily cut off from the rest of the world, but “then the mood changed and the arguments began.” Sethe and Beloved close out Denver when both determine that Beloved is Sethe’s lost daughter. Their battles revolve around Beloved’s recounting of the anguish she has experienced and Sethe’s pleas for forgiveness and accounts of what she has suffered for her children. Denver notes, however, that Sethe’s inability to leave the subject alone suggests that she “didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused, And Beloved helped her out.” At this point Denver’s concern shifts from Beloved’s safety in her mother’s presence to Sethe’s as she confronts Beloved’s anger. She is also anxious about the fact that since Sethe has been fired from her position at a local restaurant, there has been no food for them to eat.

When Denver asks a woman in the neighborhood for help, food starts appearing in the yard. Denver decides she must find a job to help support her family and is hired by Mr. Bodwin, a white abolitionist who had helped get Sethe released from jail. Word of the family’s distress reaches the entire black community and, as a result, one morning, thirty women congregate outside their home. There the women begin to pray and sing in an effort to chase the ghosts of the past. In the midst of this congregation, Mr. Bodwin arrives to pick up Denver for work. When Sethe sees a white man arriving at her home, she appears to flash back to the past, confusing him with one of the four white men who came to return her to slavery, and so tries to kill him with an ice pick. As the women, including Denver, wrestle the pick away from her, Beloved, who had been standing on the porch observing the scene, seems to disappear.

Soon after the incident, Paul returns to Bluestone Road. Finding Sethe in a dazed state, he realizes she has given up on life as Baby Suggs had before she died, and tells her, “Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.” When Sethe cries out that she has lost Beloved, her best thing, Paul tells her, “You your best thing,” as he holds her hand. The novel closes with Sethe’s questioning, “Me? Me?”

Characters

Beloved

There are several signs that seem to indicate that the mysterious stranger who suddenly turns up at 124 Bluestone is the spirit of Sethe’s daughter returned in flesh. She has “new skin, lineless and smooth,” is the same age Sethe’s baby would have been had she lived, and her name is “Beloved,” the same word carved on the baby’s gravestone. She has little memory of where she has been or why she is here, but somehow knows to ask Sethe “where your diamonds?” and “your woman she
never fix up your hair?” Sethe responds by telling the girl stories that were too painful to recall to anyone else. Beloved devours the stories and cannot take her eyes off of Sethe. She also has an “anger that ruled when Sethe did or thought anything that excluded herself.” She drives away the suspicious Paul D by seducing him, and gets Sethe to eliminate Denver from their games. The way that she begins to punish Sethe for leaving her suggests the ghost is finally taking revenge for her murder, while her sudden disappearance from the house seems supernatural.

Is Beloved really a ghost, however, or is her acceptance in the house a case of mistaken identity? There are hints that she is actually an escapee from a slave ship, where she lost her mother. She tells Denver of where she was before: a dark place with “nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in” until she came up to “the bridge.” Denver interprets this as a picture of the underworld, but it could easily be the hold of a slave ship as well. Beloved’s stream of consciousness chapter—telling of a place with little water or daylight and a “little hill of dead people”—also seems to describe the suffering of a slave hold during the Atlantic passage. Critic Deborah Horvitz offers another interpretation of Beloved’s character in *Studies in American Fiction*: “she represents the spirit of all the women dragged onto slave ships in Africa and also all Black women in America trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them.” Thus Beloved’s descriptions of the ship’s passage reflect the experiences of Sethe’s own mother; her search for “the woman with my face” mirrors Sethe’s loss of her own mother; and Beloved’s abandonment by her mother, who “goes into the water,” resembles the desertion suffered by Sethe’s dead daughter. “As the embodiment of Sethe’s memories,” the critic concludes, “the ghost Beloved enabled her to remember and tell the story of her past, and in so doing shows that between women words used to make and share a story have the power to heal.”

**Edward Bodwin**

Edward Bodwin is one of the abolitionist siblings who assist Baby Suggs when she first arrives in Cincinnati. “He’s somebody never turned us down,” Stamp Paid says, and it is primarily Bodwin’s efforts that save Sethe from the gallows after she murders her daughter. He also helps Sethe find a job after she is released from prison. Bodwin’s most distinguishing features are his snow-white hair and his dark velvety mustache, an interesting combination of black and white that leads his enemies to call him a “bleached nigger.” Even
when Sethe comes at him with an ice pick, Bodwin chooses not to interpret her actions as a personal attack and continues aiding the family by giving Denver a job in his home.

**Miss Bodwin**
Miss Bodwin is one of the abolitionist siblings who provide Baby Suggs with a house and a job after she is freed from Sweet Home. She is described as “the whitewoman who loved [Baby Suggs],” and her kindness extends to Sethe and her daughter after Baby Suggs’s death.

**Buglar**
Sethe’s second son finally leaves home, presumably to fight in the Civil War, after a mirror shatters simply from his looking at it. Denver remembers fondly how he and Howard would make up “die-witch!” stories. One of the few things Sethe tries to remember is the way her son looked—not the fact that he would not let her near him after his sister’s death, or how he always slept hand-in-hand with his brother after that day.

**Paul D**
“For a man with an immobile face,” Sethe thinks of Paul D, “it was amazing how ready it was to smile, or blaze or be sorry with you.” Perhaps it is this ability to “produce the feeling you were feeling” that makes him “the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry.” But the cruelty of slavery has left Paul D with a “tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut.” He is the only man left from Sweet Home; his brothers Paul F and Paul A were sold away or hung, while Sixo was burned and Halle was broken. Paul D is sold from Sweet Home and put into a Georgia prison after trying to kill his new master. He is kept in a hole in the ground and put to work on a chain gang. A hard rain that turns their cells to mud also allows the gang to escape. A tribe of sick Cherokee frees him from his chains and points the way north.

Since then Paul D has wandered around, thinking he could not stay in any one place for more than a couple of months. Seeing Sethe, however, “the closed portion of his head opened like a greased lock,” and he tells her, “We can make a life, girl.” The way he makes people respond to him at the carnival starts to convince even Denver that this might be true. Beloved’s arrival changes things, however. The girl seduces Paul, and his inability to resist her leads him to doubt his manhood. When Sethe explains the newspaper clipping to him, Paul D condemns her, moving quickly “from his shame to hers.” He leaves the house, but his rusted tin has sprung open, making him wonder for the first time “what-all went wrong.” Paul D returns to Sethe after Beloved leaves—but not because of it: “Paul D doesn’t care how It went or even why. He cares about how he left and why.” Their shared history makes it more bearable, and he realizes that “only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers.”

**Denver**
Isolated in the house with her mother Sethe, lonely Denver’s only companions are from the past: memories of her brothers, her imaginings of her father, her mother’s stories of Denver’s birth, and the baby ghost that haunts the house. The reader is allowed hints of the kind of bright, happy child Denver might have been had Sethe not isolated the family from the community. But Denver “had taught herself pride in the condemnation Negroes heaped upon them,” and is also proud of her secret knowledge about the ghost. Another way she deals with her isolation is by creating an emerald play world in a section of boxwood bushes. There her imagination “produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out.” The only story Denver wants to hear is

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**Media Adaptations**

- After a decade of working to bring the novel to the screen, producer-star Oprah Winfrey finally brought out a film version of *Beloved* in 1998. Directed and co-produced by Oscar-winner Jonathan Demme, the film starred Winfrey as Sethe, Danny Glover as Paul D, Kimberly Elise as Denver, and Thandie Newton as Beloved.
- An unabridged audio recording of *Beloved* by the author is available from Random House Audio; an abridged version read by actress Lynn Whitfield is also available from Random House Audio.

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the one of her birth; she “hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself…. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver’s absence from it.” Thus she feels threatened by Paul D’s arrival, and sobs out her loneliness for the first time in ten years. The idea that he and her mother might form a “twosome” that would make Sethe “look away from her own daughter’s body” is too much to bear. The next day, when the three of them see their shadows holding hands, Sethe thinks it means the three of them might form a family. But Paul D recognizes that Denver has “something she’s expecting and it ain’t me.”

When Beloved appears, it seems to Denver as if this is what she has been waiting for: her sister returned to her in the flesh. Although she loves her mother—the only person left who has not abandoned her—she has uneasy memories about “the thing in Sethe” that could make her harm her children. She begins to transfer her affection to Beloved, who she thinks needs her protection. Thus when Sethe nearly chokes in the clearing, “Denver was alarmed by the harm she thought Beloved planned for Sethe, but felt helpless to thwart it, so unrestricted was her need to love another.” But it soon becomes evident to Denver that Beloved may be more of a danger than Sethe is. “Frightened as she was by the thing in Sethe that could come out, it shamed her to see her mother serving a girl not much older than herself.” She fears losing her mother—being abandoned yet again—and takes steps to support the family that finally result in Sethe’s returning to the community. Denver provides another example of how the rupture of families caused by slavery forces people to survive without the family and community support they should have. As Judith Thurman observes in the New Yorker, Sethe never truly finished delivering Denver, so the girl “will be forced to complete the labor by herself.”

**Amy Denver**

See Whitegirl

**Ella**

Ella is a practical woman who had “been beaten every way but down.” Ella and her husband John are part of the Underground Railroad, picking up fugitives after Stamp Paid ferries them across the river. She is friendly with Sethe until the attempt on the children, because “she understood Sethe’s rages in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it.” Ella’s disapproval of Sethe’s proud isolation leads her to ignore Paul D’s need for shelter, when she would usually offer to help any black man in need. But when news comes that Sethe’s dead daughter is beating her, “it was Ella more than anyone who convinced the others that rescue was in order.”

**Mr. Garner**

Mr. Garner allows his slaves more privileges than most owners do: they are encouraged to think for themselves, suggest and implement improvements to the farm, and even handle guns. He claims he has the only “nigger men” in Kentucky and is proud because it shows he is “tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men.” When he delivers Baby Suggs to the Baldwins, having allowed her son Halle to purchase her freedom, he brags that she never went hungry or received a beating under his care. But his kindness cannot cover the inherent evil of slavery. As Baby Suggs thinks, “You got my boy and I’m all broke down. You be renting him out to pay for me way after I’m gone to Glory.” Garner dies of a stroke, which Sixo says was caused by a jealous neighbor.

**Mrs. Lillian Garner**

Although Mrs. Garner and her husband seem fairly benevolent owners, their attitudes betray how slavery dehumanizes its victims, no matter how kindly the slaves are treated. When Sethe asks Mrs. Garner if her marriage to Halle means a wedding, the woman laughs and pats Sethe on the head as if she were a pet. She calls Baby Suggs “Jenny,” assuming that the name on the slave papers is what she calls herself. After her husband’s death, Mrs. Garner brings in her schoolteacher brother-in-law to run the farm—not because they need the help, but because she does not want to be the only white person there. She becomes ill with a tumor in her throat, and is thus too weak to intervene when the schoolteacher’s methods turn severe.

**Howard**

Sethe’s oldest child leaves home, presumably to fight in the Civil War, after two tiny handprints appear in a cake. Denver remembers fondly how he and his brother would make up “die-witch!” stories and let her have the whole top of the bed. Howard “had a head shape nobody could forget,” and it is one of the few things Sethe can remember about him: otherwise, she might recall how he never let her touch him after his sister’s death, or how he always slept hand-in-hand with his brother after that day.
Lady Jones

Lady Jones is a light-skinned black with “gray eyes and yellow woolly hair” that make her the focus of envy and hatred within the black community. Because of her light skin she has received privileges, including being picked to receive schooling in Pennsylvania, “and she paid it back by teaching the unpicked.” Denver is one of the unpicked, and she attends Lady Jones’s school until a fellow student reminds her of her family’s shame. Thus it is Lady Jones whom Denver turns to for help feeding the family, and it is Lady Jones’s kind “Oh, baby” that “inaugurated [Denver’s] life in the world as a woman.”

Nelson Lord

Nelson Lord is in Denver’s class with Lady Jones. He is “a boy as smart as she was,” but it is his question about her family history that leads her to leave school and begin a period of silence. When Denver takes steps to save the family, however, it is Nelson’s words that open her mind to the idea of having a self to preserve. At the end of the novel, it is implied that he is courting Denver.

Schoolteacher

The schoolteacher is Mr. Garner’s sister’s husband, and perhaps provides the best example of the dehumanizing effects of slavery. The schoolteacher comes to oversee Sweet Home after Mr. Garner’s death. He sees the opportunity as one for studying the slaves, whom he considers no different than animals. Sethe says she thinks it was the schoolteacher’s questions “that tore Sixo up … for all time,” and his listing of her “animal characteristics” strengthens her resolve to resist capture: “No one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper,” Sethe says in explaining her actions to Beloved. The schoolteacher teaches his nephews that the slaves are like animals, but he fails to prevent them from “mishandling” them and so there is “nothing there to claim” when they discover Sethe and her children in Cincinnati.

Sethe

Sethe has “iron eyes and a backbone to match.” Slavery, however, has “punched the glittering iron out of Sethe’s eyes, leaving two open wells” that reflect the emptiness in her soul. She has spent all of her efforts “not on avoiding pain but on getting through it as quickly as possible.” She avoids planning anything, because “the one set of plans she made—getting away from Sweet Home—went awry so completely she never dared life by making more.” So instead of counting on family or community to aid her, Sethe creates a small, insulated world in which her only goals are to escape memories of the past and protect the one child she has left. By herself, she can face anything; she is “the one who never looked away,” who can watch a man get stomped to death or repair a pet dog with a dislocated eye and two broken legs.

Paul D’s arrival changes things for Sethe, adding “something she wanted to count on but was scared to.” His stories also give Sethe “new pictures and old remembrances that broke her heart.” Even so, she eventually decides she wants him to stay because he makes her story “bearable because it was his as well.” When Paul D discovers the truth behind her escape from the schoolteacher, however, he moves out. Sethe “despised herself for having been so trusting,” but soon forgets this trouble when she determines that Beloved is really the ghost of her dead baby daughter. She can forget everything, now, Sethe thinks: “I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all.” Sethe devotes herself to Beloved, cutting Denver out of their games, and subjecting herself to the growing girl’s whims. When Denver tells Janey Wagon about their problems, Janey thinks that “Sethe had lost her wits, finally, as Janey knew she would—trying to do it all alone with her nose in the air.” But is it insanity or fear of yet again losing her “best thing” that causes Sethe to attacks Mr. Bodwin? In the aftermath, with Beloved gone and Denver growing up, Sethe seems to have given up. She retreats to Baby Suggs’s bed, just wanting to rest. But Paul D recognizes, even if she doesn’t, that “you your best thing, Sethe,” and promises her that together they can build “some kind of tomorrow.”

Sixo

One of the Sweet Home men, Sixo is “indigo with a flame-red tongue.” His dark color, his nighttime dancing, his folk knowledge, and his knowing tales” indicate he is probably a first-generation slave brought over from Africa. He maintains a relationship with Patsy the “Thirty-Mile Woman” despite the distance and difficulties that keep them apart. After the schoolteacher arrives, his questions “[tear Sixo up]” and he stops speaking English because there “was no future in it.” Sixo is captured shortly after the group escape attempt, and his wild singing convinces the schoolteacher “this one will never be suitable.” They tie him to a tree and light a fire at his feet, but have to shoot him to stop his
laughter and singing. Sixo laughs because he has beaten the white men by fathering a child with the Thirty-Mile Woman (“Seven-O!”), while his song is a “hatred so loose it was juba.”

**Stamp Paid**

Stamp Paid was originally named Joshua, but he renamed himself after he “handed over his wife to his master’s son” and gave in to his wife’s demand that he stay alive and not take revenge. “With that gift, he decided that he didn’t owe anybody anything.” This “debtlessness” does not satisfy him, however, and so he takes to helping runaways across the Ohio River, “helping them pay out and off whatever they owed in misery.” He is witness to the “Misery” that occurs when the schoolteacher comes to take Sethe back to slavery, and prevents her from killing Denver as well. He is concerned about “truth and forewarning,” and so he shows Paul D a newspaper clipping about Sethe’s arrest. Stamp Paid has second thoughts about his actions after Paul D leaves 124 Bluestone, however, and thinks maybe he does owe the family something. When he returns to the house to try to set things straight with Sethe, he sees Beloved, and it is through Stamp Paid that the community comes to learn of Sethe’s trouble.

**Baby Suggs**

*See Jenny Whitlow*

**Halle Suggs**

Halle is the youngest of Baby Suggs’s eight children, and the only one she has been able to see grow to adulthood. He rented himself out on Sundays to buy his mother’s freedom, and Paul D figures that strong love is why Sethe chose Halle out of all the Sweet Home men. Sethe similarly remembers a tender care that “suggested a family relationship rather than a man’s laying claim.” Halle does not appear when it is time to escape Sweet Home, however, and Sethe thinks he is dead—better that than believing he abandoned her and their children. Paul D reveals that he saw Halle alive, however, but empty-eyed and with butter smeared on his face. He pieces together that the final straw for Halle must have been witnessing the attack on Sethe that stole her milk. Baby Suggs claims that she felt Halle die—in 1855, on the same day that Denver was born.

**Janey Wagon**

Janey Wagon has worked at the Bodwins’ since she was fourteen, and helps Denver find a job when she comes asking for help. It is interesting to note the change in Janey’s attitude over her years with the Bodwins. When Baby Suggs first visits, young Janey tells her to “eat all you want; it’s ours,” implying that she feels she is part of the household. Her attitude is a little different some twenty years on, however. Although she says of her employers that she “wouldn’t trade them for another pair,” she is concerned that the Bodwins want “all my days and nights too,” not recognizing that she is her own person, with a life apart from their house.

**Whitegirl**

Amy Denver is the “whitegirl” who helps Sethe through childbirth shortly after her escape from Sweet Home. Although she is white, she is “trash,” and her situation is not so different from many slaves. She is escaping beatings and indentured servitude—paying off the debt her mother incurred coming to America—and has a place and a thing that symbolize freedom for her. Amy is on her way to Boston in a single-minded pursuit of “carmine velvet” when she finds Sethe lying on the wrong side of the Ohio River. Her “fugitive eyes and her tenderhearted mouth” lead Sethe to trust her, and with Amy’s encouragement she gets up and crosses the river to freedom. Amy’s “good hands” help bring Sethe’s baby into the world, and Sethe names the girl Denver in her memory.

**Jenny Whitlow**

Baby Suggs’s life serves as an illustration of how slavery separates families: “Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized.” Although her bill of sale says her name is “Jenny Whitlow,” she claims the name “Baby Suggs,” given to her by a “husband” who escaped and left her when he had the chance. Halle is the only one of her eight children she sees grow to adulthood, and this leads her to say: “A man ain’t nothing but a man. But a son? Well now, that’s somebody.” After Halle buys her freedom, Baby Suggs turns the house on Bluestone Road into a place where friends and strangers can meet, refresh themselves, and talk. She also preaches in a nearby field, “offering up to [people] her great big heart.” When Sethe attempts to murder her grandchildren rather than see them returned to slavery, Baby Suggs “could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed.” She remains in bed, contemplating the
harmlessness of colors, until she dies, her great heart finally quitting.

**Themes**

**Race and Racism**

“You got two feet, not four,” Paul D tells Sethe when she reveals her secret to him, and the dehumanizing effect of slavery is a primary theme of *Beloved*. According to the schoolteacher, slaves are just another type of animal: not only does he list their “animal characteristics,” he considers them “creatures” to be “handled,” similar to dogs or cattle. In some ways, they are not even worth as much as animals: “Unlike a snake or a bear,” he thinks while pursuing the runaways, “a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin.” Because slaves are treated no better—and sometimes worse—than animals, it leads them to question what it is that makes one human. While Mr. Garner was alive, for instance, Paul D truly believed that he was a man. But after the schoolteacher arrives and puts the bit to him, he learns a different lesson: “They were trespassers among the human race.” There is another side to the dehumanizing effects of slavery, however: just as it turns slaves into animals, it turns owners into monsters. As Baby Suggs thinks of white people, “they could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did.” Stamp Paid understands this effect as well: “The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince [whites] how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, … the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them,” Stamp Paid thinks, but “the jungle whites folks planted in them. And it grew. It spread … until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made.”

**Freedom**

For people treated no better than animals, freedom can be a difficult concept to grasp. When Halle buys his mother’s freedom, for instance, Baby Suggs thinks that he “gave her freedom when it didn’t mean a thing.” When she steps across the Ohio River, however, “she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn’t; that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew there was nothing like it in this world.” While under the schoolteacher’s bit, Paul D sees Mister, the rooster, and thinks, “Mister, he looked so … free. Better than me.” The reason for this, Paul D explains, is that “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was.” Once he has escaped from prison and earned his first money, Paul D decides that “to eat, walk and sleep anywhere was life as good as it got.” Freedom is more than this, however, as Sethe has discovered. While waiting for Halle to turn up, Sethe had to learn to become her own woman. “Freeing yourself was one thing,” she thinks; “claiming ownership of that freed self was another.” This can be a difficult task, especially if one is tormented by painful memories of slavery. In the end, Paul D comes to agree with Sethe about the nature of freedom: “A place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, that was freedom.”

**Motherhood**

One of the cruelest effects of slavery is how it severs bonds of love, particularly those between mother and child. Sethe still feels the pain of separation from her mother, while Baby Suggs has lost all but one of her eight children. One reaction to this loss of love is to deny it; as Ella says, “If anybody was to ask me I’d say ‘Don’t love nothing.’” After having her first three children sold away and a fourth fathered by the man who sold them, Baby Suggs “could not love [that child] and the rest she would not.” Sethe similarly understands that she couldn’t love her children “proper” at Sweet Home “because they wasn’t mine to love.” Paul D also knows motherlove is risky: “For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love.” When he nevertheless suggests to Sethe that they have a baby together, Sethe thinks, “Lord, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer.” This comment is terribly ironic, of course, coming from a woman who murdered her child for such a love.

Despite the pain motherlove can bring to a woman, the maternal impulse is often too powerful to deny. As Baby Suggs says, “A man ain’t nothing but a man. But a son? Well now, that’s somebody.” Sethe similarly thinks her children are “her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—that part of her that was clean.” A mother’s love has no time limits, either, as Sethe tells Paul D: “Grown don’t mean nothing to a mother…. I’ll pro-
tect [Denver] while I’m live and I’ll protect her when I ain’t.” It is this need to care for her children that drives Sethe on to Ohio despite her pain. When telling Paul D about the beating she received before escaping, she keeps repeating, “they took my milk!”—emphasizing how important it was to her to save her milk for her baby. Unfortunately, Sethe’s experiences with slavery have twisted her maternal protective impulses. “To keep them away from what I know is terrible,” Sethe attempts to murder her own children. This love may be “too thick,” as Paul D says, but motherless Sethe never had a chance to learn the difference: “Love is or it ain’t,” she replies. “Thin love ain’t love at all.”

**Memory and Reminiscence**

The physical wounds of slavery heal quickly compared to the mental and emotional scars suffered by its victims. Throughout *Beloved*, characters struggle with their memories, trying to recall the good things without remembering the bad. Paul D has “shut down a generous portion of his head” so that he will not “dwell on Halle’s face and Sixo laughing.” Of her first seven children, Baby Suggs can only remember that the oldest liked the burned bottom of bread. “That’s all you let yourself remember,” Sethe says, and for her “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay.” For Sethe, “re-memories” are so powerful that they exist for her as physical objects: “if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again,” she tells Denver. In contrast, Ella seems to have a healthy attitude towards the past: “The past [was] something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out.” But Sethe has a “rebellious brain” which does not allow her to forget: “there is still more that Paul D could tell me and my brain would go right ahead

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**Topics For Further Study**

- The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 changed the way free states were required to deal with fugitive slaves, leading to Sethe’s terrible response to her capture. Research the history of the legal status of fugitive and freed slaves in America. Create a timeline tracing these legal developments, and include both Supreme Court decisions and state and federal laws.

- In preparing to write *Beloved*, Toni Morrison read several slave narratives—autobiographies by freed slaves. What was missing from these narratives, said the author, was a portrayal of the inner lives of their subjects. Read one or two such slave narratives, such as those by Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs. Does Morrison’s point have validity? Argue for or against this opinion in an essay, comparing the narrative with Morrison’s novel and using examples from the text to support your arguments.

- In *Beloved*, Amy Denver has also escaped from a situation where she faced beatings and forced labor. Research the history of indentured servitude in America. Who was subject to such contracts? In what ways was it similar to slavery? In what ways was it different? Write a paper describing your findings.

- Read some African-American ghost stories, such as the folktales in Patricia McKissack’s *The Dark Thirty* or Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* and *Her Stories*. What elements do they have in common with the “ghost story” of *Beloved*? Present your conclusions in an essay, and use examples from the texts.

- One of the important themes in *Beloved* is the significance of the bond between mother and child; Sethe, Denver, and Beloved all suffer to some extent because of a rupture in this bond. Do some research into the psychology of the mother-child relationship. What happens when small children are not permitted to bond with a parent? Compare your findings with what happens to the characters in the novel. Remember to cite both research studies and the novel.

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and take it and never say, No thank you. I don’t want to know or have to remember that.” Beloved seems to have “disremembered” almost all of her past, and when Sethe comes to believe the girl is her lost daughter she “was excited to giddiness by the things she no longer had to remember.” Her words seem to imply that Sethe tortures herself with memories as a sort of punishment. Now that her daughter is returned, however, “I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all.” The conclusion of the novel seems to imply that finally putting the past behind her will enable Sethe to survive. “We got more yesterday than anybody,” Paul D tells Sethe. “We need some kind of tomorrow.” “Remembering seemed unwise,” the narrator similarly notes, and so Beloved is “disremembered”—deliberately forgotten: “This is not a story to pass on.”

**Creativity and Imagination**

Despite the statement that “this is not a story to pass on,” stories and the imagination play an important role in the novel. Denver’s imagination is her only weapon against loneliness and it “produced its own hunger and its own food.” Sethe’s “deprivation had been not having any dreams of her own at all.” Her brain has been “loaded with the past and [is] hungry for more,” leaving her “no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day.” For Beloved, listening to Sethe’s stories “became a way to feed her” and the “profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling” allows Sethe to share things that had been too painful to speak about before. When the lonely Denver tells stories to Beloved, she gives her subjects “more life than life had.” Denver uses these stories to keep Beloved with her, trying to “construct out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved.” Stories have the effect of bringing listener and teller together, for in the telling “the monologue became, in fact, a duet.” It is this kind of sharing that allows Sethe to begin to heal, and eventually brings her to the brink of a new life with Paul D. Planning on making “some kind of tomorrow” with Sethe, Paul D thinks that “he wants to put his story next to hers.”

**Flashback**

A flashback is a literary device used to present action that occurred before the beginning of the story. In *Beloved*, the narrator structures the story in such a way that past events are related as a way of explaining the present. In the first paragraph, for instance, the narrator says that “by 1873, Sethe and her daughter were [the ghost’s] only victims.” This sets the main action in 1873, but the paragraphs that follow explain how Baby Suggs and the two boys escaped the ghost prior to that date. Flashbacks are also presented as the memories or stories of several of the characters. When Paul D first sees Sethe, for instance, he begins to recall how the men of Sweet Home reacted to her arrival over twenty years ago. As Paul D and Sethe spend time with each other, they remember moments of their previous time together and tell each other stories of what has happened to them since their time at Sweet Home. There are more direct flashbacks in the narrative as well, when past events are related.
directly, without present-day comment from the person telling or remembering the tale. Examples of this direct style of flashback occur when Beloved first hears the story of Denver’s birth and when Paul D recalls how the Plan went wrong. Deborah Horvitz notes in Studies in American Fiction that flashbacks play an important role in the novel, for they reflect one of its important themes. The flashbacks, the critic writes, “succeed in bridging the shattered generations by repeating meaningful and multi-layered images. That is, contained in the narrative strategy of the novel itself are both the wrenching, inter-generational separations and the healing process.”

**Idiom**

Idiom refers to a word construction or verbal expression that is closely associated with a given language or dialect. For example, the English expression “a piece of cake” is sometimes used to describe a task that is easily done. In Beloved, Morrison makes use of idiom to help re-create the sense of a specific community, that of African Americans in Reconstruction Ohio. When the characters use words like “ain’t” and “reckon” and phrases like “sit down a spell,” it helps place their characters within that community. One particularly interesting example of this idiom is the way in which it describes people of different races. In compound words such as “whitegirl,” “blackman,” and “coloredpeople,” a person’s race is actually part of the word that describes them. This seems to indicate that there is a fundamental difference between blacks and whites, for if the only difference between them were color one would say “black woman” and “white woman.” Instead, the compound words seem to indicate that black and whites are entirely different creatures. These words thus reinforce one of the themes of the novel: that one of the foremost evils of slavery is the way in which it dehumanizes people, both black and white.

**Motif**

A motif (sometimes called a motiv or leitmotiv) is a theme, character type, image, metaphor, or other verbal element that is repeated throughout a piece of work. Throughout Beloved, there is one such motif that is repeated with regularity: a description of the characters’ eyes and how they see. “The eyes are windows to the soul,” goes the common saying, and the eyes of the novel’s characters are likewise revealing. Sethe, for instance, has had the “glittering iron” punched out of her eyes, “leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight.” When schoolteacher catches up to Sethe, her eyes are so black she “looks blind,” and after too much conflict with Beloved her eyes turn “bright but dead, alert but vacant.” Similarly, the disturbing thing about Beloved’s eyes is not that the “whites of them were much too white” but that “deep down in those big black eyes there was no expression at all.” When Paul D recalls his time on the chain gang in Georgia, he remembers that “the eyes had to tell what there was to tell” about what the men were feeling. When the schoolteacher comes upon the scene in the shed, he decides to turn back for home without claiming any of the survivors because he has had “enough nigger eyes for now.”

The way people use their eyes is also important. Denver thinks of her mother as one “who never looked away,” not even from pain or death. Paul D thinks he is safe from Beloved’s advances “as long as his eyes were locked on the silver of the lard can.” Denver thinks it is “lovely” the way that she is “pulled into view by the interested, un-critical eyes” of Beloved. It is shortly after Beloved asks Sethe, “you finished with your eyes?” that Sethe realizes Beloved is the ghost of her baby daughter. “Now,” she thinks, “I can look at things again because she’s here to see them too.” But as Beloved drains the energy from Sethe, “the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness.” When Paul D wants to return to Sethe, he considers how he looks through other people’s eyes: “When he looks at himself through Garner’s eyes, he sees one thing. Through Sixo’s, another. One makes him feel righteous. One makes him feel ashamed.” Finally, however, he considers how he looks through Sethe’s eyes. After he does this, he returns to the only woman who “could have left him his man- hood like that.”

**Imagery**

Imagery refers to the use of images in a literary work. Critics frequently describe Morrison’s writing as “lyrical” or “poetic” because her use of vivid, powerful imagery. One such image is that of the “chokecherry tree” on Sethe’s back. Instead of having the narrator give a simple description of the oozing wounds on Sethe’s back, Amy Denver describes it as a chokecherry tree, complete with sap, branches, leaves, and blossoms. The picture this comparison draws in the reader’s mind is much more disturbing than a straightforward description would be. This is just one example of how the author sets beautiful natural images in contrast to the horrors of slavery, the better to highlight its evil.
**Historical Context**

**The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850**

One of the central events of the novel—Sethe’s attack on her children—is described as “her rough response to the Fugitive Bill.” Prior to 1850, U.S. law permitted slave owners to attempt to recover escaped slaves, but state authorities were under no obligation to assist them. Many Northerners saw aiding and protecting fugitive slaves as one way to combat the evil of slavery. Escaped slaves who settled in free states were therefore relatively safe from capture, since their abolitionist communities rarely cooperated with slave owners. This sense of safety was jeopardized by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

As America expanded her borders, slavery was a continuing source of controversy. The addition of territory acquired in the Mexican-American War of 1846-48 sparked heated debates over the status of slavery in these new lands. When Pennsylvania Representative David Wilmot proposed that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part” of the territory acquired from Mexico, Southern states strongly objected. The Wilmot Proviso was defeated, and Kentucky congressman Henry Clay brokered a new deal. The resulting Compromise of 1850 was a series of bills designed to satisfy both North and South. As well as admitting California as a free state and allowing Utah and New Mexico to decide the slavery issue for themselves, the Compromise of 1850 enacted a much stricter fugitive slave law. Under this law, fugitive slaves were denied a jury trial, facing a court-appointed commissioner instead. This commissioner received ten dollars for certifying delivery of an alleged slave, but only five dollars when he refused it. And not only did federal officials take part in the capture and return of fugitives, but they could compel citizens to help enforce the law—and jail or fine them if they refused.

Anti-slavery forces were outraged by this new law, and often took matters into their own hands to combat it. In cities such as Boston, Detroit, Milwaukee, Syracuse, New York, and Christiana, Pennsylvania, mobs rescued alleged fugitives from their captors and in some cases even killed slave owners. Less confrontational forms of protest increased as well, as the new law inspired an increase in organized assistance to slaves such as the Underground Railroad. In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe was inspired by the Fugitive Slave Law to write her classic anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Despite these very visible activities protesting the law, most Northerners complied with it. Of an estimated two hundred African Americans arrested during its enforcement, only twenty were released or rescued; the remainder returned to slavery.

**The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan**

Even after the abolition of slavery ended the threat of being returned to servitude, African Americans still found their rights and even lives in danger. Many white Southerners found Reconstruction Act of 1867—the Republican government’s plan for returning the South to the Union—difficult to swallow. This act replaced the mostly all-white state governments created after the war with five military districts. Each district had 20,000 troops, commanded by a Union general. Southern states were forced to grant new rights to African Americans, and more than a dozen black congressmen and two senators were elected. In response to what they perceived as Republican oppression, white Southerners formed a secret society whose aim was to intimidate these unwanted administrators. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) grew from a social club into a terrorist organization that used arson, beatings, and even murder to achieve their ends.

Klan activity stepped up after the Fifteenth Amendment, which guaranteed all men the right to vote, was passed in 1870. Not only did this amendment ensure the voting rights of Southern blacks, it expanded the right to vote to African Americans in Northern states. Klan activity was similarly expanded, as its violence spread to northern states. In *Beloved*, Paul D considers Cincinnati “infected by the Klan,” which he calls “desperately thirsty for black blood.” The KKK terrorized African Americans to keep them from voting, often with great success. Many African Americans were murdered, and their killers had little fear of prosecution. To combat this violence, Congress passed the Ku Klux Act in 1871, which strengthened the penalties for interfering with elections. This led to almost three thousand indictments that year, and the 1872 elections were relatively peaceful. Nevertheless, the Klan had demonstrated its strength, and after the last federal troops left the South in 1877, white supremacists were free to establish a deeply segregated society that openly oppressed African Americans until the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

**Toni Morrison and the Post-Aesthetic Movement**

Mirroring their increased presence in politics, African Americans also became highly visible as
writers during the 1960s. Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston had been prominent in the 1920s, while Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison achieved both literary and popular acclaim in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of these works were popular because of the way they were able to interpret the black experience for a white audience. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, writers within the “Black Aesthetic Movement” attempted to produce works of art that would be meaningful to the black masses. Writers such as Amiri Baraka, Haki R. Madhubuti, and Sonia Sanchez created works which highlighted the disparity between blacks and whites and affirmed the value of African-American culture, thus creating a sense of pride and identity in the black community.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, however, many African-American writers chose a slightly different approach. Instead of focusing on the differences between blacks and whites in America—and thus placing themselves within or against a white social context—these “Post-Aesthetic” writers used a wholly African-American context for their work.

Even after the Civil War, reminders of the previous slave status of African Americans—like the signs in the commercial district pictured here—were everywhere.
Instead of looking to the outside world for solutions or validation, the African Americans in these works found answers within their own families or communities. Toni Morrison is considered one of the most prominent writers within this Post-Aesthetic movement, which includes such authors as Alice Walker, Kristin Hunter, and John Edgar Wideman. By emphasizing the importance of family and community in dealing with life's challenges, Morrison's *Beloved* provides a notable example of this literary movement.

### Critical Overview

While Morrison had earned a considerable critical reputation with her first four novels, many initial reviews of *Beloved* showed no hesitation in acclaiming it the masterpiece of a supremely gifted writer. Margaret Atwood, for instance, called the work "another triumph" and added in her *New York Times Book Review* article that "Morrison's versatility and technical and emotional range appear to know no bounds. If there were any doubts about her stature as a pre-eminent American novelist, of her own or any other generation, *Beloved* will put them to rest." *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani similarly termed the novel "a work of mature imagination—a magisterial and deeply moving meditation not only on the cruelties of a single institution, but on family, history, and love." In the *Chicago Tribune*, Charles Larson acclaimed *Beloved* as the author's "darkest and most probing novel" and concluded that "Toni Morrison has demonstrated once again the stunning powers that place her in the first ranks of our living novelists."

Despite such emphatically positive remarks and the 1988 Pulitzer Prize, not all critics embraced the novel. In *Commentary*, Carole Iannone faulted the work's "oft-repeated miseries" as both numbing and sensationalistic. "Morrison seems simply unsure how much she wants the past, which means both the immediate past and the historical past, to weigh in the lives and behavior of her characters," the critic added. While noting stretches of "first-class writing" in the novel, *New Republic* critic Stanley Crouch called the work melodramatic "protest pulp fiction" that "rarely gives the impression that her people exist for any purpose other than to deliver a message." Martha Bayles similarly offered the "heretical opinion" that *Beloved* "is a dreadful novel, final proof of Morrison's decline from high promise into fashionable medioc-

"The critic maintained that in relying increasingly on magical elements, the author has shifted from "bravely probing the consciences of even the most pitiable black characters ... to predictably blaming white racist oppression for every crime committed by the inhabitants of an enchanted village called blackness." Other reviewers, however, observed that the novel was able to overcome its melodramatic tendencies. While noting that the novel has "a slightly uneven, stepping-stone quality," *Nation* contributor Rosellen Brown nevertheless found *Beloved* "an extraordinary novel. It has certain flaws that attach to its design and occasionally to its long reach for eloquence, and an ending that lacks the power of the tragedy it is meant to resolve. But its originality, the pleasure it takes in a language at the same time loose and tight, colloquial and elevated, is stunning." "Morrison is essentially an operatic writer and as a 'production' *Beloved* has some of the excesses" of opera, Judith Thurman similarly stated in the *New Yorker*. Nevertheless, the critic concluded that "there's something great in [the novel]: a play of human voices, consciously exalted, perversely stressed, yet holding true. It gets you."

Often a reviewer's opinion of the novel was tied to his or her interpretation of Beloved's character. Those who saw her merely as a ghost were more likely to find the novel less compelling. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, for instance, Carol Rumens found Beloved's portions of the novel unsatisfactory, for "the travails of a ghost cannot be made to resonate in quite the same way as those of a living woman or child." For other critics, however, the riddle of Beloved has proven a complex question with many answers. For Susan Bowers, Beloved is a creature returned from the dead—but as living flesh, not a ghost. "Her physical presence," the critic wrote in *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, "has the effect of Judgment Day on all those whom she encounters," leading the residents of 124 to address "her or his most profound individual anguish, whatever lies at the core of each identity." To Elizabeth House, however, "evidence throughout the book suggests that the girl is not a super-natural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery." House noted in *Studies in American Fiction* that Beloved's entry into the family is due to a double case of mistaken identity, caused by "the destruction of family ties brought by slavery, and Beloved, seen as a human being, emphasizes and illuminates these themes." Other reviewers see Beloved as a figure who represents "the spirit of
all the women dragged onto slave ships in Africa and also all Black women in America trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them,” as Deborah Horwitz notes in *Studies in American Fiction*. According to the critic, Beloved is a stand-in both for Sethe’s mother, dragged from her home in Africa, and Sethe’s baby girl, emerged from the spirit world. “Beloved’s character is both the frame and center of the book, and it is her story—or her desperate struggle to know and experience her own story—that is the pumping heart of the novel,” Barbara Schapiro concluded in *Contemporary Literature*. “Beloved’s struggle is Sethe’s struggle; it is also Denver’s, Paul D’s, and Baby Suggs’s. It is the struggle of all black people in a racist society, Morrison suggests, to claim themselves as subjects in their own narrative.”

Another aspect of the novel to come under critical scrutiny has been the circular structure of its narrative. *Beloved* is told through story and flashback, presenting the past in pieces which the reader has to fit together. This structure is important to the theme of the novel, according to several critics. As Susan Bowers remarked, “the characters’ remem-oring in *Beloved* epitomizes the novel’s purpose of conjuring up the spirits and experiences of the past and thus ultimately empowering both characters and readers.” “The splintered, piecemeal revelation of the past is one of the technical wonders of Morrison’s narrative,” Walter Clemons similarly explained in *Newsweek*. “We gradually understand that this isn’t tricky storytelling but the intricate exploration of trauma.” By moving “the lurid material of melodrama into the minds of her people, where it gets sited and sorted, lived and relived,” Morrison endows it with “the enlarging outlines of myth and trauma, dream and obsession,” Ann Snitow noted in *Voice Literary Supplement*. Eusebio L. Rodrigues likened the narrative structure of Morrison’s novel to an “an extended blues performance.” As he explained in the *Journal of Narrative Technique*, “phrases and images will be used over and over again to generate rhythmic mean-

ings; fragments of a story will recur, embedded in other fragments of other stories. A born bard, the narrator, a blueswoman, will cast a spell on her audience so that fragments, phrases, words accelerate and work together to create a mythic tale.”

Morrison’s work has also been hailed for its ability to re-create the inner lives of people subjected to oppression and brutality, something the author believed was missing from slave narratives of the nineteenth century. Walter Clemons applauded the author’s success in achieving this authenticity: “In *Beloved*, this interior life [of slaves] is re-created with a moving intensity no novelist has even approached before.” Barbara Schapiro similarly hailed the novel’s psychological realism: “Beloved penetrates, perhaps more deeply than any historical or psychological study could, the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery. The novel reveals how the condition of enslavement in the external world, particularly the denial of one’s status as a human subject, has deep repercussions in the individual’s internal world.” In portraying more than just the physical trauma of slavery, the novel has a “great bridging capacity … in the way it opens up the imaginations of those who haven’t lived it to the memory of slavery and the experience of carrying that memory in your past,” according to *Washington Post* contributor Amy E. Schwartz. “Written in an anti-minimalist, lyrical style in which biblical myths, folklore, and literary realism overlap, the text is so grounded in historical reality that it could be used to teach American history classes,” Horwitz similarly stated. But the true measure of the novel’s worth, the critic concluded, is that “as a simultaneously accessible and yet extremely difficult book, *Beloved* operates so complexly that as soon as one layer of understanding is reached, another, equally as richly textured, emerges to be unravelled.”

**Criticism**

*Wendy Perkins*

Perkins is an Associate Professor of English at Prince George’s Community College in Maryland and has published several articles on British and American authors. In the following essay, she examines how the narrative structure of *Beloved* reinforces the novel’s focus on the problematic search for identity.

Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* has achieved considerable recognition for its moving portrait of an African-American family’s struggle against the debilitating effects of slavery. Merle Rubin in the *Christian Science Monitor* declares *Beloved* “a stunning book and lasting achievement,” while John Leonard in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* places it “on the highest shelf of American literature, even if half a dozen canonized white boys have to be elbowed off.” In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Jennifer Uglow ad-
• Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1969), is a contemporary portrayal of the self-hatred and destruction that can occur when African Americans look to white society for validation. Pecola Breedlove is a young black girl who has adopted white child star Shirley Temple as her ideal. In comparison, Pecola feels ugly and longs for blue eyes. After her father rapes her, Pecola’s obsession turns to insanity. She gives birth prematurely to a baby who later dies, and withdraws into a fantasy world where she has the bluest eyes of all.

• Told from a male perspective, Morrison’s award-winning *Song of Solomon* (1979) relates Milkman Dead’s search for identity. Milkman wavers between the altruism of his aunt and the materialism of his father and sets out on a journey of discovery. He overcomes his confusion and dissatisfaction to discover the richness of his African-American heritage, the importance of community, and the nature of love and faith.

• The first novel to appear after Morrison’s Nobel Prize, *Paradise* (1998) tells the story of the fictional town of Ruby, Oklahoma, founded by African-American freedmen after Reconstruction. Morrison examines the nature of community, responsibility, and history as she relates the events that lead the townsmen to destroy a nearby convent.

• Winner of the National Book Award, Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (1990) is a powerful tale of a newly freed slave who stows away on a New Orleans ship in order to avoid marriage. When the ship turns out to be a slave clipper bound for Africa, Rutherford Calhoun faces a journey that is harrowing in both body and spirit.

• Inspired by the furor over the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s classic novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) was a pioneering portrayal of the evils of slavery and the humanity of slaves. (The stereotype of an “Uncle Tom” comes from poorly adapted play versions of the novel, not Stowe’s Christ-like title character.) The novel sold over three hundred thousand copies during its first year of publication and served as a source of inspiration for many anti-slavery activists.


• Another young-adult writer has created a searing portrayal of the evils of slavery. In *Nightjohn* (1993), Gary Paulsen tells the story of twelve-year-old Sarny, a slave girl who risks serious punishment when she learns to read.

• One critic likened the public impact of Morrison’s *Beloved* to that of another novel that tells of a people’s fight to combat prejudice and oppression. Leon Uris’s popular bestseller *Exodus* (1957) is an epic tale of the Jewish settlement of modern Israel. In preparing to write the novel, the author read 300 books, travelled 12,000 miles inside Israel, and interviewed more than 1,200 people.

• Harriet A. Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* (1862) was one of the first autobiographies written by an African American. In it, Jacobs relates her birth into servitude, her affair with a white neighbor, her escape from a North Carolina plantation, and her struggles to free herself and her children.
dresses one of the novel’s prominent themes when she notes that Morrison’s works often concentrate on “the developing sense of self.” Beloved’s unconventional narrative structure, with its disrupted chronology and fragmented glimpses of the main characters, foregrounds this theme as it delineates the support that can enable and the obstacles that can impede this development.

Sethe’s struggles to come to terms with her past are complicated by her inability to establish a clear vision of herself. The novel’s nonlinear structure in Part I, which affords readers only brief impressions of her, highlights this problem. She has repressed much of the truth about what she experienced as a slave at Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation where she grew up. There she was not allowed an identity, especially after Mr. Garner died and his brother-in-law, whom she calls the schoolteacher, took over. Schoolteacher considered his black slaves animals, as evidenced by his careful measurements of their physiques and notations of their “human” and “animal” characteristics. Morrison reinforces this attitude when she shifts the narrative point of view to the schoolteacher when he arrives at Bluestone Road to take Sethe back to Sweet Home. When he witnesses Sethe’s attempts to kill her children, he thinks of the abuse she suffered from her nephew and determines he “overbeat” her:

Suppose you beat the hounds past that point that way. Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else…. the animal would revert—bite your hand clean off…. you just can’t mishandle creatures and expect success.

While at Sweet Home, Sethe was forced to deny herself as a wife and a mother. She was not permitted to marry Halle in a legal ceremony and she felt compelled to keep her love for her children in check. She later admits to Paul, “I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love.” Paul understands that Sethe protected herself by loving “small.” When chained like an animal and caged in the ground in Georgia, he notes that he “picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own…. Anything bigger wouldn’t do. A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open.” Paul had suffered under similar abuse at Sweet Home and after he was sent to prison in Georgia for the attempted murder of his new owner. He tells Sethe his own repressed memory from his time at Sweet Home. The worst part for Paul after he was chained, waiting to be taken to a new plantation, was “walking past the roosters looking at them look at me.” He focuses on one in particular named Mister, “who was allowed to be and stay what he was.” Paul admits,

I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you’d be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.

During their conversations, Sethe and Paul allow only fragments of their past to emerge from what Paul calls his locked and rusted shut tobacco tin, buried deep in his chest. They keep these talks short, acknowledging that “saying more might push them both to a place they couldn’t get back from” as they struggle to discover a strong sense of themselves. Sethe often turns to cooking after her conversations with Paul, claiming “nothing better than that to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past.” However, Sethe’s attempts to repress her memories ultimately fail when she finds Beloved at Bluestone Road.

Beloved’s presence forces Sethe to confront her past and thus to reconcile her vision of herself. Many critics consider Beloved to be the reincarnation of Sethe’s daughter, citing her seemingly supernatural gifts and her strong links to Sethe. In this interpretation, Sethe’s buried memory emerges in the form of a ghost. Others, however, argue that Beloved had survived a passage on a slave ship, where she watched her mother throw herself overboard. She then transfers to Sethe all the emotions she experienced toward her mother. Morrison’s narrative structure, with its brief glimpses of Beloved’s dreams and the lack of detail about where she came from, makes it difficult to arrive at a definitive conclusion about Beloved. Yet whether or not she really is the reincarnation of Sethe’s murdered daughter has little bearing on the novel’s focus: the difficulties Sethe faces as she tries to determine her identity. Morrison’s refusal to provide a clear vision of Beloved reinforces her point that discovering one’s true self, especially when that self is a black woman, is problematic.

Soon after Beloved’s arrival, Paul shows Sethe the newspaper clipping about “the Misery,” which compels her to confront the tragedy of her past and her identity as a mother. Sethe pieces together the fragments of her repressed memory and, for the first time, faces the full implications of her actions, taking the first painful step toward recovery of self. When the “four horsemen” approached Bluestone Road, the moment became apocalyptic for Sethe. The hope that she could be a mother to her children, which she had allowed herself during her
twenty-eight days at Baby Suggs’, was dashed. She tries to explain to Paul that her actions that day stemmed from her great love for her children, but Paul cannot envision her as a responsible mother. At one point, he views her as almost inhuman:

“I stopped him,” she said…. “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.”

“Your love is too thick,” he said…. “What you did was wrong, Sethe.”

“I should have gone on back there? Taken my babies back there?”

“There could have been a way. Some other way…. You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet.

The narrative shift to Paul’s point of view and his inability to regard Sethe as a responsible mother illustrates how Sethe’s loss of self results not only from the horrors of slavery, but also the problems of identity that arise within the black community. After his words create a gulf between them, Paul acknowledges that he has “moved from his shame to hers…. From his cold-house secret straight to her too-thick love. His own shame and lack of a strong sense of self prevents him from understanding Sethe. As a result he leaves Sethe alone, much like the black community had done. Her ostracism, however, results from what the community considers to be her overweening pride as well as her actions. Morrison’s presentation of contrasting visions of Sethe highlight the difficulties Sethe faces in her search for herself.

Sethe’s efforts to prove herself to be a good mother redouble when she confronts Beloved’s anger and resentment toward her. The novel reveals the complicated dynamics of mother-daughter relationships when it shifts back and forth between Sethe’s and Beloved’s point of view. Beloved’s feelings of betrayal and abandonment counter Sethe’s pleas for understanding and acknowledgement of her as a protective and long-suffering mother. In an ultimate expression of her love for her children, Sethe attacks Mr. Bodwin, whom she confuses with the men who came to take her back to Sweet Home. Yet when Beloved disappears, Sethe seems to lose all sense of self and gives up on life. Ultimately, though, Morrison suggests that she may be saved when Paul returns to Bluestone Road and presents her with a new vision of herself, telling her, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.”

Through the presentation of the fragmented landscape of Sethe’s past, Morrison effectively delineates the psychological effects of racial oppression. Beloved presents a powerful account of a black woman’s struggle to overcome those devastating effects and discover a complete sense of self.


Elizabeth B. House

In this review, House refutes the commonly held assumption among critics that Beloved is the reincarnated ghost of Sethe’s murdered daughter. House supports her interpretation of Beloved as human, arguing that this explanation emphasizes the destructive ways in which slavery impacted people’s perceptions of themselves and their relationships.

Most reviewers of Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved have assumed that the mysterious title character is the ghostly reincarnation of Sethe’s murdered baby, a flesh and blood version of the spirit Paul D. drives from the house....

Clearly, ... writers evaluate Morrison’s novel believing that Beloved is unquestionably a ghost. Such uniform acceptance of this notion is surprising, for evidence throughout the book suggests that the girl is not a supernatural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery.

In large part, Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning fifth novel is about the atrocities slavery wrought both upon a mother’s need to love and care for her children as well as a child’s deep need for a family: Sethe murders her baby girl rather than have her taken back into slavery; Baby Suggs grieves inconsolably when her children are sold; Sethe sees her own mother, a woman who was brought from Africa on a slave ship, only a few times before the woman is killed; Denver loves her mother, Sethe, but also fears the woman because she is a murderer. These and other incidents illustrate the destruction of family ties brought by slavery, and Beloved, seen as a human being, emphasizes and illuminates these themes.

Unraveling the mystery of the young woman’s identity depends to a great extent upon first deciphering chapters four and five of Part II, a section that reveals the points of view of individual characters. Both of these chapters begin with the line “I AM BELOVED and she is mine,” and in these narratives Morrison enters Beloved’s consciousness. From Beloved’s disjointed thoughts, her stream-of-conscious rememberings set down in these chapters, a story can be pieced together that
describes how white slave traders, “men without skin,” captured the girl and her mother as the older woman picked flowers in Africa. In her narrative, Beloved explains that she and her mother, along with many other Africans, were then put aboard an abysmally crowded slave ship, given little food and water, and in these inhuman conditions, many blacks died. To escape this living hell, Beloved’s mother leaped into the ocean, and, thus, in the girl’s eyes, her mother willingly deserted her.

In order to grasp the details of this story, chapters four and five of Part II must be read as a poem: thus, examining the text line by line is often necessary. As Beloved begins her narrative, she is recalling a time when she was a young girl, for she says “I am not big” and later remarks again “I am small.” However, the memory of these experiences is so vivid that, to her, “all of it is now.” One of the first traumas Beloved describes is being in the lower hold of a slave ship. The captured Africans have been crouching, crammed in the overcrowded space for so long that the girl thinks “there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching” and then she notes that “someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in.” At first the men and women on the ship are separated, but then Beloved says that “storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men […] that is when I begin to be on the back of the man.” This person seems to be her father or at least a father figure, for he carries the young girl on his back. Beloved says “I love him because he has a song” and, until he dies on the ship, this man sings of his African home, of the “place where a woman takes flowers away from their leaves and puts them in a round basket […] before the clouds.”

These lyrics bring to mind the first scene in Part II, chapter four. Beloved’s tale begins with the girl watching her mother as the woman takes “flowers away from leaves […] she put them in a round basket. She fills the basket […] she opens the grass.” This opening of the grass is probably caused by the mother’s falling down, for Beloved next says, “I would help her but the clouds are in the way.” In the following chapter, the girl clarifies this thought when she explains, “I wanted to help her when she was picking the flowers, but the clouds of gunsmoke blinded me and I lost her.” Thus, what the girl is remembering is the capture of her mother by the men without skin, the armed white slave traders. Later, Beloved sums up her story by explaining that the three crucial points in her life have been times when her mother left her: “Three times I lost her: once with the flowers because of the noisy clouds of smoke; once when she went into the sea instead of smiling at me; once under the bridge when I went in to join her and she came toward me but did not smile.” Thus, the slave traders’ capture of her mother is the first of three incidents that frame the rest of Beloved’s memories.

Once incarcerated on the ship, Beloved notices changes in her mother. She remembers seeing the diamond earrings, “the shining in her ears,” as they were picking flowers. Now on the ship, her mother “has nothing in her ears,” but she does have an iron collar around her neck. The child knows that she “does not like the circle around her neck” and says, “if I had the teeth of the man who died on my face I would bite the circle around her neck […] bite it away […] I know she does not like it.” Sensing her mother’s unhappiness, her longing for Africa, Beloved symbolizes the woman’s emotions by ascribing to her a wish for physical items: “She wants her earrings […] she wants her round basket.”

As Beloved continues her tale, she explains that in the inhuman conditions of the ship, many blacks die. She says, “those able to die are in a pile,” and the “men without skin push them through with poles,” evidently “through” the ship’s port-holes, for the hills of dead people “fall into the sea which is the color of the bread.” The man who has carried her on his back is one of those who succumbs, and as he takes his last breath, he turns his head and then Beloved can “see the teeth he sang through.” She knows that “his song is gone,” so now she loves “his pretty little teeth instead.” Only after the man’s head drops in death is the girl able to see her mother; Beloved remembers, “when he dies on my face I can see hers […] she is going to smile at me.” However, the girl never receives this gesture of affection, for her mother escapes her own pain by jumping into the ocean, thus committing suicide. The scene is etched in Beloved’s memory: “They push my own man through […] they do not push the woman with my face through […] she goes in […] they do not push her […] she goes in […] the little hill is gone […] she was going to smile at me.” Beloved is haunted by this second loss of her mother for, unlike the separation caused by the slavetraders’ attack, this time the mother chooses to leave her. The girl agonizes as she tries to understand her mother’s action and later thinks that “all I want to know is why did she go in the water in the place where we crouched? Why did she do that when she was just about to smile at me? I wanted to join her in the sea but I could not move.”
Time passes and Beloved notes that “the others are taken […] I am not taken.” These lines suggest that when the other slaves are removed from the ship, Beloved, whose beauty is noted by several characters, is perhaps kept by one of the ship’s officers. At any rate, she is now controlled by a man who uses her sexually, for “he hurts where I sleep,” thus in bed, and “he puts his finger there.” In this situation, Beloved longs for her mother and explains, “I wait on the bridge because she is under it.” Although at this point she may be on an inland bridge, Beloved is most likely waiting for her mother on the ship’s bridge; if she is being kept by one of the vessel’s officers, the girl would logically be there. But, wherever she is at this time, Beloved last saw her mother as the woman went into the sea; thus, the girl associates water with her parent and believes she can be found in this element.

Beloved’s stream-of-consciousness narrative then jumps to the time, apparently several years later, when she arrives at the creek behind Sethe’s house. Morrison does not specify exactly how Beloved comes to be there, but various characters give possible explanations. The most plausible theory is that offered by Stamp Paid who says, “Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that’s her. Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup.” This possibility would explain Beloved’s “new” skin, her unlined feet and hands, for if the girl were constantly kept indoors, her skin would not be weathered or worn. Also, the scar under Beloved’s chin could be explained by such an owner’s ill-treatment of her. Morrison gives credence to Stamp Paid’s guess by having Sethe voice a similar hypothesis and then note that her neighbor, Ella, had suffered the same fate. When Beloved first comes to live with the family, Sethe tells Denver “that she believed Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind. Something like that had happened to Ella.…” In addition, Beloved’s own words suggest that she has been confined and used sexually. The girl explains to Denver that she “knew one whiteman,” and she tells Sethe that a white man “was in the house I was in. He hurt me.” In a statement that reveals the source of her name, Beloved says that men call her “beloved in the dark and bitch in the light,” and in response to another question about her name, she says, “in the dark my name is Beloved.”

Whatever situation Beloved has come from, when she reaches the creek behind Sethe’s house, she is still haunted by her mother’s absence. The lonely girl sees the creek, remembers the water under the ship’s bridge where she last glimpsed her mother, and concludes that her lost loved ones are beneath the creek’s surface. In her soliloquy, Beloved links the scene to her mother and father figure[s] by evoking images of the African mother’s diamond earrings and the father’s teeth. She says that she knows the man who carried her on his back is not floating on this water, but his “teeth are down there where the blue is … so is the face I want the face that is going to smile at me.” And, in describing the creek she says, “in the day diamonds are in the water where she is and turtles in the night I hear chewing and swallowing and laughter […] it belongs to me.” The diamonds Beloved thinks she sees in the water are most likely reflected bits of sunlight that make the water sparkle. Similarly, the noises the girl interprets as “chewing and swallowing and laughing” are probably made by the turtles. Alone in the world, Beloved’s intense need to be with those she loves undoubtedly affects her interpretation of what her senses perceive.

If Stamp Paid is right and the girl has been locked up for years, then she has not had normal experiences with people or places. She lacks both formal learning and the practical education she would have gained from a family life. These deficiencies also undoubtedly affect her perceptions, and, thus, it is not especially surprising that she does not distinguish between the water under the ship’s bridge and that in the creek behind Sethe’s house. To the untutored girl, all bodies of water are connected as one.

Apparently, Beloved looks into the creek water, sees her own reflection, and concludes that the image is her mother’s face. She then dives into the water, believing that in this element her mother will at last give her the smile that was cut short on the slave ship. Beloved says,

“I see her face which is mine […] it is the face that was going to smile at me in the place where we crouched […] now she is going to […] her face comes through the water … her face is mine […] she is not smiling… I have to have my face […] I go in… I am in the water and she is coming […] there is no round basket […] no iron circle around her neck. In the water, Beloved cannot “join” with the reflection, and thus she thinks her mother leaves her for a third time; distraught, she says, “my own face has left me I see me swim away…. I see the bottoms of my feet […] I am alone.”
Beloved surfaces, sees Sethe’s house, and by
the next day she has made her way to the structure.
Exhausted by her ordeal, the girl is sleeping near
the house when Sethe returns from the carnival.
Beloved says,

I come out of blue water…. I need to find a place to
be…. There is a house…. I sit […] the sun closes my
eyes […] when I open them I see the face I lost […]
Sethe’s is the face that left me…. I see the smile…. It
is the face I lost […] she is my face smiling at me
[…] doing it at last.”

Thus, when Beloved awakens and sees Sethe
smiling at her, the girl mistakenly thinks that the
woman is her long lost mother. In the second half
of her narrative, Beloved even more clearly states
her erroneous conclusions when she asserts, “Sethe
is the one that picked flowers … in the place be-
fore the crouching…. She was about to smile at me
when the men without skin came and took us up
into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them
into the sea. Sethe went into the sea…. They did
not push her…."

What finally emerges from combining
Beloved’s thoughts and the rest of the novel is a
story of two probable instances of mistaken iden-
tity. Beloved is haunted by the loss of her African
parents and thus comes to believe that Sethe is her
mother. Sethe longs for her dead daughter and is
rather easily convinced that Beloved is the child
she has lost.

Morrison hints at this interpretation in her pref-
ace to the novel, a quotation from [The New Tes-
tament] Romans 9:25: “I will call them my people,
which were not my people; and her beloved, which
was not beloved.” As Margaret Atwood notes [in
an article in The New York Times Book Review],
the biblical context of these lines emphasizes Paul’s
message that people once “despised and outcast,
have now been redefined as acceptable.” However,
Morrison’s language, especially in the preface, is
rich in meaning on many levels. In view of the am-
biguity about Beloved’s identity found in the rest
of the novel, it seems probable that in this initial
line Morrison is suggesting an answer to the riddle
of who Beloved really is or, to be more exact, who
she is not. The words “I will call … her beloved,
which was not beloved” suggest that the mysteri-
ous girl is not really Sethe’s murdered daughter re-
turned from the grave; she is “called” Beloved, but
she is not Sethe’s child. Also, the line “I will call
them my people, which were not my people” hints
that Beloved mistakenly thinks Sethe and her fam-
ily are her blood kin.

Seen in this light, Beloved’s story illuminates
several other puzzling parts of the novel. For ex-
ample, after Sethe goes to the Clearing and feels
that her neck is being choked, Denver accuses
Beloved of causing the distress. Beloved replies,
“‘I didn’t choke it. The circle of iron choked it.’”
Since she believes Sethe and her African mother
are the same person, Beloved reasons that the iron
collar her African mother was forced to wear is
bothering Sethe.

Beloved’s questions about Sethe’s earrings are
one reason the woman comes to believe that the
mysterious girl is her murdered child. Before her
death, Sethe’s baby girl had loved to play with her
mother’s crystal earrings. Sethe had “jingled the
earrings for the pleasure of the crawling-already?
girl, who reached for them over and over again.”
Thus, when Beloved asks “where your diamonds?
… Tell me your earrings,” the family wonders,
“How did she know?” Of course, Beloved asks this
question remembering the “shining” in her African
mother’s earrings, the diamonds that were proba-
bly confiscated by the slave traders. However,
Sethe thinks Beloved is remembering the crystal
earrings with which the dead baby played.

This instance of misunderstanding is typical,
for throughout the novel Sethe, Denver, and
Beloved often fail to communicate clearly with
each other. In fact, the narrator describes Beloved’s
and Denver’s verbal exchanges as “sweet, crazy
conversations full of half sentences, daydreams and
misunderstandings more thrilling than understand-
ing could ever be.” This evaluation is correct, for
as the three women talk to each other, each per-
son’s understandings of what she hears is slanted
by what she expects to hear. For example, Denver,
believing Beloved to be a ghost, asks the girl what
the “other world” was like: “‘What’s it like over
there, where you were before? … Were you cold?’”
Beloved, of course, thinks Denver is asking her
about Africa and the slave ship, and so she replies,
“‘Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room
to move in.’” Denver then inquires whether
Beloved saw her dead grandmother, Baby Suggs,
or Jesus on the other side: “‘You see Jesus? Baby
Suggs?’” and Beloved, remembering the death
laden ship, replies that there were many people
there, some dead, but she did not know their names.
Sethe has a similar conversation with Beloved and
begins “Tell me the truth. Didn’t you come from
the other side?” and Beloved replies “Yes. I was
on the other side.” Of course, like Denver, Sethe is
referring to a life after death world, while Beloved
again means the other side of the ocean, Africa.
Encased in a deep and destructive need for what each thinks the other to be, Sethe and Beloved seclude themselves in Sethe’s house, Number 124, and the home becomes like a prison cell for the two disturbed women. They separate themselves completely from the rest of humanity, even Denver, and they begin to consume each other’s lives: Beloved continually berates Sethe for having deserted her. Sethe devotes every breath to justifying her past actions to Beloved. Their home life deteriorates to the point that the narrator says “if the whitepeople … had allowed Negroes into their lunatic asylum they could have found candidates in 124.”

Sethe’s and Beloved’s obsession with the past clearly affects their perception of what happens when the singing women and Edward Bodwin approach Sethe’s house. Ella and the other women are there, singing and praying, hoping to rid Sethe of the ghost they think is plaguing her. Edward Bodwin is the white man who helped Sethe when she was jailed for murdering her baby; now he has come to give Denver a ride to her new job. However, when Sethe comes out of her house and views the scene, her mind reverts to the time when another white man, her slave owner, had come into the yard.

On that fateful day Sethe had killed her child, and she had first sensed danger when she glimpsed her slave master’s head gear. When she saw the hated “hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew.” Years later, as Sethe stands holding Beloved’s hand, she sees Bodwin approach, and her unsettled mind replays her thoughts from long ago. She recognizes “his … hat wide-brimmed enough to hide his face but not his purpose…. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies.” Apparently deciding that this time she will attack the white intruder and not her own child, Sethe rushes toward Bodwin with an ice pick. Ella strikes Sethe, and then the other women apparently fall on the distraught mother, pinning her to the ground.

As this commotion occurs, Beloved also has a sense of déjà vu. First, the girl stands on the porch holding Sethe’s hand. Then Sethe drops the hand, runs toward the white man and group of black women, and Beloved thinks her mother has deserted her again. Remembering that her African mother’s suicide came after the hill of dead black people were pushed from the slave ship, Beloved sees the horrible scene being recreated:

But now her hand is empty…. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again … [she is running away]. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling. And above them all, … the man without skin, looking.

Beloved connects this “hill” of falling people with the pile of dead blacks who were pushed from the ship, and, terrified, the girl apparently runs away.

In his introduction to The House of the Seven Gables, Nathaniel Hawthorne notes that romances, one of the literary traditions to which Beloved is heir, are obliged to reveal the “truth of the human heart.” And, in Beloved, Morrison does just that. An important facet of this truth is that emotional ghosts of hurt, love, guilt, and remembrance haunt those whose links to family members have been shattered; throughout the novel, Morrison shows that family ties can be severed only at the cost of distorting people’s lives. In Beloved, Morrison also shows that past griefs, hurts ranging from the atrocities of slavery to less hideous pains, must be remembered, but they should not control life. At the end of the novel, Paul D. tells Sethe “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”” And, throughout Beloved, Morrison’s theme is that remembering yesterdays, while not being consumed by them, gives people the tomorrows with which to make real lives.


Margaret Atwood

In her glowing review of Morrison’s award-winning novel, Atwood lauds the author’s use of the supernatural in Beloved.


For Further Study


A thorough survey of critical response to the novel prior to its winning the Pulitzer Prize. The critic suggests that the difficulties critics have had in interpreting the novel lie in its sensitive subject matter and complex design.


Marilyn R. Chandler, “Housekeeping and Beloved: When Women Come Home,” in her Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction, University of California Press, 1991, pp. 291-318. Analyzes Beloved and Marilyne Robinson’s Housekeeping “under the rubric of house and home as ideas in relation to which women in every generation and in every situation have had to ‘work out their salvation’ and define their identities.”


Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, “Maternal Bonds as Devoirs of Women’s Individualization in Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” in African American Review, Vol. 26, No. 1, Spring, 1992, pp. 51-59. Argues that Beloved “develops the idea that maternal bonds can stunt or even obviate a woman’s individualization or sense of self,” and that “the conclusion of the book effects a resolution of the tension between history and nature which underlies the movement of the work as a whole.”


Trudier Harris, “Of Mother Love and Demons,” in Callaloo, Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring, 1988, pp. 387-89. Analyzes Morrison’s treatment of the “mother love” theme in Beloved. Harris argues that in “exorcising” Beloved “the women favor the living over the dead, mother love over childish punishment of parents, reality over the legend of which they have become a part.”


Carl D. Malmgren, “Mixed Genres and the Logic of Slavery in Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” in Critique, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, Winter, 1995, pp. 96-106. Notes Beloved’s incorporation of elements from various genres, including the ghost story and historical novel, and argues that “[it] is the institution of slavery that supplies the logic underwriting the novel, the thematic glue that unifies this multifaceted text.”


Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, editor, Conversations with Toni Morrison, University Press of Mississippi, 1994. A collection of interviews with the author, including one with Gail Caldwell on the writing of Beloved.