

Beloved by Toni Morrison

Beloved: Historical Context

 Gale Student Resources in Context, 2012

Author Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a story set in the aftermath of the American Civil War, with frequent flashbacks to the difficult days leading up to the war. The novel's main character, Sethe, is a Kentucky slave who attempts to gain her freedom by fleeing with her family to the North. After an incident in which she is forced to kill one of her own children, she eventually manages to evade her pursuers and starts a new life in Cincinnati, Ohio. Though Sethe successfully escapes from her enslavement, she remains unable to escape the haunting memory of her deceased daughter, who returns to torment Sethe, first as a spirit and then as a person who refers to herself as Beloved.

Slavery

The history of slavery in the Americas can be traced back as far as the early 1500s, when the Spanish and Portuguese captured natives of western Africa and took them to the Caribbean and Central America to work in the region's gold mines. Over the next two centuries, slavery spread into North America, especially with the rise of the triangular trade system in the 1700s. This commerce system sent African slaves to the Americas in exchange for various goods and raw materials, which were transported between the American colonies, Africa, and Europe. Though the active importation of slaves continued only until 1808, slavery remained legal in the United States for many years. By the time of the Civil War, there were an estimated four million slaves in the country, most working on southern plantations that produced valuable cash crops such as cotton and tobacco.

Slavery in the Pre-Civil War Era

By the mid-nineteenth century, the institution of slavery had become firmly entrenched in the United States, especially in the South, where it was an integral part of the regional economic system. At the same time, however, a growing anti-slavery movement had taken hold in other parts of the country, most notably in the free states of the North. While slave owners felt that the federal government was constitutionally obligated to protect their property rights, which they believed included the right to own slaves, supporters of the anti-slavery movement argued that the government should treat slaves as people and focus on assuring their freedom.

Escalating tensions between parties on both sides of the issue led to slavery becoming the dominant political dilemma of the era. Political unrest over slavery began to reach its apex in the 1850s. Among the many slavery laws passed during this time, one of the most significant, and the one most closely related to the events in *Beloved*, was the [Compromise of 1850](#).

The Compromise of 1850 was the government's response to a crisis that had developed after the United States acquired a large territory following a war with Mexico. The government had to decide whether slavery should be permitted in the new territories and states created from this land. Up until this time, the balance of free and slave states in the nation had always been kept equal. The Compromise of 1850 stated that the territories of New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, and Utah would be established as free

territories where slavery could not be practiced. As a concession to the slave owners in the now outnumbered slave states, the compromise included a bill called the [Fugitive Slave Act](#). This act required all American citizens to aid in the recovery of any slaves who tried to flee from their owners, and it denied [fugitive slaves](#) the right to a trial by jury. The passage of this act made it all but impossible for slaves to flee from their bondage or maintain their freedom anywhere in the country.

Enraged by the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act, [abolitionists](#) became more determined than ever to push for an end to slavery. As a result, political tension across the nation continued to rise. This tension eventually led to the breakdown of the Union and the start of the Civil War.

Margaret Garner

The character and story of Sethe in author Toni Morrison's *Beloved* was based, in part, on the real life of Kentucky slave Margaret Garner. Like Sethe, Garner and several members of her family attempted to flee from the Kentucky plantations where they were enslaved in 1856. The Garners headed to Cincinnati and, like Sethe, Margaret Garner found herself barricaded inside a cabin that was surrounded by federal marshals. Rather than return to slavery, Garner decided to take her children's lives and then kill herself. Before the authorities apprehended her, Garner had killed her two-year-old daughter, Mary. The rest of her children survived, and the family was taken into custody.

Unlike her counterpart in *Beloved*, Garner never attained her freedom. After a sensational two-week trial in which the opposing sides argued over whether Garner should be returned to her owner under the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act or held in Ohio to be tried for the murder of her daughter, Garner and her remaining family members were sent back to their owners. Garner's owner moved her from place to place for a time in order to prevent Ohio authorities from prosecuting her on murder charges. She remained a slave until her death in 1858.

Contemporary Context

Beloved is often considered one of the most important and influential works of [African American literature](#). The novel, which earned Morrison a Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988, was published during an era when African [American literature](#) was finally recognized as its own literary genre. Morrison herself argued that up until that point the African American point of view had been largely left out of the ongoing literary discussion of [American culture](#). In the essay "The Site of Memory," Morrison said, "We were seldom invited to participate in the discourse, even when we were its topic."

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the publication of literary works by and about [African Americans](#) increased at a prodigious rate. As one of the most significant aspects of African American history, slavery was often an important topic in these works. In addition to *Beloved*, a number of other novels, including Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, brought the African American slave experience to life and offered readers a glimpse into the harsh realities of slavery in America, the ramifications of which were still felt in the late twentieth century and beyond.

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Beloved: Themes and Construction

 *Gale Student Resources in Context, 2012*

In author Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, the title character's identity is a mystery; she may be a ghost, an embodied spirit, or a socially stunted young woman. Whatever her complex identity, *Beloved* represents the lingering, inescapable scars of [slavery](#). To Sethe, the former slave who murdered her own daughter 18 years earlier to save the child from slavery, *Beloved* is the key to her memory. To Denver, Sethe's living daughter, *Beloved* gives an identity and eventually forces her to leave the solitude she has always known.

Beloved both confines and frees the family. She becomes like a parasite, clinging to Sethe and Denver, yet her presence frees their memories and identities. She also opens the internal box—the "tobacco tin"—in which former slave Paul D imprisoned his feelings and emotions. Paradoxically, *Beloved* shares very little about herself. What she does relate about her past could confirm that she is the embodied ghost of Sethe's dead daughter; yet, she also hints at slave passages on hot, cramped ships, and thus could be a link to Sethe's mother and all other slaves.

Construction

Point of View

The story is told primarily in the third person, though several chapters are first-person, stream-of-consciousness monologues. As the characters interact and react, the past is gradually revealed in flashbacks. Some events are remembered from various points of view, allowing the reader to learn a bit more as the scenes are revisited. Events are revealed in a nonlinear fashion.

Setting

Beloved takes place primarily near [Cincinnati, Ohio](#), in 1873, at 124 Bluestone Road. The house, which is treated at times as a character itself, was the home of Baby Suggs, mother-in-law of Sethe. Baby Suggs, who died eight years prior to the start of the book, moved there after her son, Halle, worked weekends for five years to buy her freedom.

Language and Meaning

Toni Morrison uses terms including "rememory" and "disremember." Sethe believes the past lives in the present and can be encountered almost tangibly. She cannot forget, but she can "disremember" by refusing to face her memories.

Structure

Beloved is divided into three parts. The first part establishes the household and introduces Beloved into the family. The second part deals with conflicts, as various characters confront their pasts and have decisions to make. This part includes three chapters of monologues. The third part begins with Denver leaving 124 and seeking help in the [community](#), taking the step that enables healing for the family and community.

Themes

Family and Community

Slavery shattered families and instituted a false family. Slaves were often prevented from fulfilling the roles of spouse, parent, sibling, and child. Neither Sethe nor Paul D knew their parents, and Baby Suggs fell into a deep depression because she had lost all her children.

Sethe was denied a wedding with Halle, with whom she had her children, because marriage is a contract and both parties were considered property. She secretly stitched together a "wedding dress," and they consummated their relationship in a corn field. They were prevented from truly being husband and wife—in fact, Sethe recalls Halle behaving in a brotherly fashion toward her.

Beloved appears to be the age Sethe's daughter would be had she lived. Beloved first emerges from a stream near 124 wet, as if newly born. She has soft skin and breath that smells of milk. Most significantly, she has a scar on her neck, where Sethe cut her daughter many years ago in killing her. Yet Beloved also has traits and memories that are attributed to Sethe's mother. As their relationship develops, Sethe and Beloved gradually change roles, until Beloved is acting more like a mother to Sethe, who has become dependent upon the young woman. Denver feels neglected and ignored. Beloved fractures relationships, which are reformed and strengthened later.

Baby Suggs was a well-respected woman and active participant in the community, prior to Sethe killing her daughter. Since then, however, the community has shunned the residents of 124, who have in turn avoided venturing out in the town. Paul D, as an outsider, helps bridge the gap between the isolated family and the distant community when he encourages Sethe and Denver to attend a carnival. Though Denver expects a cold reception, she is surprised to find warmth in the merry atmosphere.

Memory and History

Sethe avoids her past and her memories. Yet she becomes obsessed with trying to explain her actions to Beloved, to make her understand, and she becomes locked in the past. Sethe tells stories she has kept secret for years. She finally faces the past and learns her own strengths in the present. Paul D hates Beloved yet has a sexual relationship with her that allows him to process his own painful past and learn to feel again. Beloved is also the catalyst for conversations between Paul D and Sethe that fill in the gaps of their pasts. It is one of these conversations that finally informs Sethe of the reason Halle did not meet her as planned during her escape from Sweet Home plantation. Her hope for his eventual arrival kept her tied to 124.

After Denver seeks help from her former teacher, the community finally comes to 124 to confront Beloved and memories of the past. The town faces its past and its failure to warn the family decades earlier when schoolteacher tracked Sethe to the town. The community also makes up for its failure to support Baby Suggs and her family since then by helping to exorcise the ghost. The town soon forgets Beloved, but her presence there and their response will affect the community's future.

Identity

Slavery seeks to erase identity. It allows the powerful to replace their subjects' human identities with animal identities. Slavery replaces self-worth with monetary value and alienates people from themselves. Some slaves, including Halle, lost themselves completely in insanity. Despite the widespread loss of self, several characters in *Beloved* lay claim to their identities in a specific way: Both Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid chose their names.

Paul D questions his value as a person and as a man. He loses his voice, and his humanity, when schoolteacher forces him to wear an iron bit. Sethe sees all of her value in her children.

Denver ties her identity first to that of the little ghost and later to Beloved. She can't bear to hear stories of the plantation because they do not include her. Denver finds her identity shifting with Beloved. When Sethe is not there, Beloved's neediness weighs on Denver, who must take on the role of a surrogate parent. Later, after Beloved weakens Sethe and the women of the town drive Beloved away, Denver is her mother's bridge to the community. Denver finally assumes the role of an adult and seeks a future.

Guilt

The townspeople feel Sethe is guilty of pride. Sethe, for her part, steals food from the restaurant where she works so she won't have to endure the racism of the local grocer, yet she is ashamed of being a thief. Though Sethe had clear reasons for killing her daughter and trying to kill her other three children when the white men came for her, the crime haunted her. For many years, she refused to see what she had done. Sethe's surviving children know of their mother's guilt and no longer trust her.

The community let jealousy overcome its obligations to warn the family of the approaching slave trackers. The community feels its own guilt yet condemns Sethe for her crime. Sethe feels compelled to repeatedly explain her actions to Beloved, hoping for forgiveness. In the end, she is still entrenched in the past when she mistakes Mr. Bodwin for schoolteacher. This time, however, she amends her actions of eighteen years ago and tries to protect her children. By recognizing her earlier mistake, she allows the community to resolve its guilt by engaging her family again.

Stamp Paid is also in the clutches of guilt. Though he was a friend to Baby Suggs and helped Sethe escape from slavery, he shunned 124 after Baby Suggs's death. Only later, when he questions his decision to tell Paul D about Sethe's crime, does he feel guilt for having neglected Baby Suggs's kin.

Supernatural

The characters in *Beloved* accept the existence of the supernatural. Ghosts and premonitions help them understand the importance of what is happening. Baby Suggs understands something dark is approaching before schoolteacher arrives to retrieve Sethe and the children. Paul D moves out of 124,

sleeping in the shed, after he feels Beloved has spooked him from room to room. Stamp Paid faces his own past as he stands at the door of 124, hearing angry disembodied voices.

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