

## An Analysis of Beloved: Toni Morrison's most challenged Novel

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### Abstract

The novel 'Beloved' was listed as one of the top 10 most challenged books of 2006 for "*offensive language, sexual content, and for being unsuited to its age group*". Toni Morrison's Beloved, the winner of the Nobel prize, is a novel that captures the attention of the readers solely with the way it is written. It is said that Morrison has composed Beloved as if it were a form of poetry, and it connects with its readers. It touches hearts and sends a powerful message to all who take time to read and interpret Beloved. Through this novel, Morrison has woven together the images and feelings which can be found offensive.

**Key words:** violence, provocation, slavery, discrimination, guilt, justice, animalistic behaviour, community

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's was inspired to write Beloved after coming across the case of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who murdered her own child to save it from a life of servitude. Because the case of Margaret Garner was not widely discussed, it was the most inspiring reason for writing Beloved. Morrison very firmly believes that in order for post-slavery African Americans to find a way of healing, they first need to recognize their past. And to keep Margaret Garner in mind, Morrison has written Beloved which exposes the real history of slavery. In reality, Beloved brings to life what really happened physically as well as emotionally to African Americans during the times of Reconstruction and on. There is no other way to teach this than to include references from a true life story which allows us all to connect with the characters and see inside their minds. Authors like Toni Morrison have a message which they hope to convey to their readers.

Many of the times, when the message is a direct reflection of historical occurrences, it can be difficult to find a way which will best bring forth the desired message. The collection of books by Morrison has always been challenged for their crude images of sexual harassment, violence,

vulgarity, and racism among other things. Such topics as these can be construed as offensive and inappropriate for Beloved's targeting reading level. According to **Darling**, "*Beloved, in its entirety, challenges us to visualize, contemplate, empathize, and comprehend the reality of 19<sup>th</sup> century Black men and women*". Many of the people who lived during the Civil war era do not want to recollect the memories from their past. Repressing memories, such as Sethe was repressing memories that were filled with guilt and regret, can prove to be harmful to one's body and mind as expresses in Beloved. History played a crucial role in shaping what American is today. The memories need to be remembered in a healthy manner. "*Beloved is a prime example that there are ways, such as through writing, to confront the painful memories of the past and enlighten the world today with the truth of what really happened during the times of slaver*"- **Darling**.

## The Most Challenged Novel- Beloved

Beloved, which revolves around the incidents which happened on a slave plantation known as Sweet Home, revealed how slavery tore apart families. Halle Suggs dedicated himself to life on the plantation by selling himself to buy his mother, Baby Suggs' freedom. His wife, Sethe, is pregnant with his child when plans were made to escape. Sethe escaped, only by having to leave Halle behind. The men who lived on the Sweet Home plantations were deprived of certain pleasures in life, therefore they were reduced to, "*fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs and waiting for the new girl*". Beloved grabbed the public's attention with its images of bestiality. It brought forth the images of slavery which before now had been hidden. This suggests and is proven further in the book that if you treat people like animals, then they will behave like animals.

The way in which Morrison describes how white people see blacks during the time which Beloved took place is as follows, "*White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift, unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping*

snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood...It was the jungle white folks planted in them". After hearing the schoolteacher directly compare Sethe to a four legged animal, it filled her with anger which she retained in her later life, still unwilling to open up to the power of healing. The fact that Morrison brought in the idea of how the white men found comparison between slaves and animals led to the development of a certain scene which could be seen as provocative and violent to parents whose children were reading *Beloved* in a scholastic environment. Towards the end of the novel, **Morrison** states, "*The one I managed to have milk for and to get it to her even after they stole it; after they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses. But I wasn't too nasty to cook their food or take care of Mrs. Garner*". The children should be exposed to the atrocities that the characters in Morrison's book were exposed to in order to begin to comprehend how Sethe, Denver, or Paul D felt. Keeping things hidden or sugarcoating the truth doesn't make children learn anything. It makes them form opinions based on the false information they've learned about history which doesn't accomplish anything in dealings with people of different ethnicities. It wasn't necessarily the fact that Sethe was sexually abused that bothered her; it was the fact that they were milking her like a cow. It is the parts of Sethe's life such as these that force her to dwell on the past and the pain, confined to 124 Bluestone Road, stagnated and not able to find healing.

While working as an editor at Random House, Toni Morrison discovered the story of Margaret Garner who became her inspiration for the main character, Sethe. What drove Toni Morrison to write *Beloved* in the first place was the fact that the story of Margaret Garner was left untold. For many people living during the time in which *Beloved* took place, it re-told their stories which they didn't have the courage to tell out loud. After her attempt to escape slavery, both Sethe and Margaret Garner escaped with plans to kill all of their children, Sethe only succeeded in killing one of her children, her crawling-already baby who was not given a name other than that which was carved into her headstone, *Beloved*. Although Sethe wished to write the words "Dearly *Beloved*," she could only afford one of the words. That was only after bargaining with her body and having sex with the person who engraved the headstone. Sethe murdered her child by slitting its throat with a saw. Once knowing that one of her children was dead, she proceeded on to her

newborn child which she birthed on her escape route from Sweet Home. She had attempted to throw it at a wall, but missed. This incident was what Beloved revolved around. Beloved was a reflection of the lasting impression of guilt and regret from this event and how Sethe was coping with it. Sethe had good intentions regardless of the fact if they were destructive or not.

Sethe's main priority was being a good mother to her children. She saw that the only way to be a good mother was to save them from slavery. Her motherly instinct overpowered every sense of justice. It was her motherhood which turned her into a killer. **Morrison** stated in *Beloved*, "*Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of its mother's swing*". It is this heart-wrenching honesty in this act of brutality which displayed what lives of slaves were really like. This showed how far they'd go to protect their families. There are instances such as the aforementioned one within *Beloved* which bring to life the horror of the situation. Then there are times where Morrison used her masterful way with words to see Sethe's perspective as poetry and an act of love.

Within *Beloved*, Morrison writes, "*I have felt what [slavery] felt like and nobody walking or stretched out is going to make you feel it too. Not you, not none of mine, and when I tell you you mine, I also mean I'm yours. I wouldn't draw breath without my children*". Sethe goes on to say that she was doing what it took to make her babies safe. Paul D, after learning what Sethe did to her baby, explained her love for her children to be "too thick." When a life of slavery is all a person has known, there is no possible way to wish that fate upon anyone, especially not children. *Beloved* explained the reasoning behind why Sethe did what she did in an honest manner, and no book should be criticized for doing so. If young adults are taught to learn about one's nation's history, they should learn about it in a historically-accurate manner. Speaking of

making everything come to life within Beloved, it brings up discussion about the character of Beloved herself.

Beloved is believed to be the spirit of Sethe's murdered child reincarnated. **Morrison** stated, *"The purpose of making her real is making history as real as possible"*. When Beloved came back to Sethe, it brought all of Sethe's repressed feelings and emotions to the surface for Beloved to feed off of. Most of all Beloved gets her enjoyment from making Sethe remember her guilt at how she killed her. *"Beloved serves as a symbol within the African American community, she represents the African American history and the memories that were part of that history"*- **Barnett**. Towards the end of the novel, right before her exorcism, Beloved seemed to be pregnant. Morrison wrote, *"The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderous black and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling"*. Standing on the front porch of 124 Bluestone Road, Beloved smiles in her nakedness and fatness because she feels she has no guilt. She has nothing to feel ashamed about, whereas the humans do, Sethe especially. Beloved, who was viewed as a demon, had a way, through reincarnation, to reincarnate the demonic acts committed during the particular time period.

Through the efforts of Denver, Sethe's surviving child, she brought the community back together to confront their memories and wounded histories. Beloved was trying to show that through all the hurt and pain there is a way to rise above it. The exorcism of Beloved marked the turning point for Sethe and what was left of her family. Denver broke free from her mother's stronghold and because of her love for her mother, not vice versa; she took the first step towards healing, which was another common theme throughout Beloved. Morrison wanted her readers to focus moreover, on the positive aspects and how to overcome grief and regret, yet also not ignoring all the negativity that coincided within Beloved.

Another factor exposed to this book is the element of racism within its covers. During the times of the Civil War and Reconstruction until present times, racism exists. She wanted to show the truth about racism and how it was a strong factor in people's lives. Morrison found a way to

show the toll racism takes on families and individuals. Within *Beloved* there are different forms of racism that were noted, one of which being the obvious racism from whites directed at African Americans. This was made clear by the fact that Sweet Home was a slave plantation which motivated Sethe to flee in the first place, and eventually murdering her child. She blamed the white people for what she did to her baby, but was in denial and forced to live with the survivor's guilt for the rest of her life. Another type of racism was the African American community towards Sethe and 124 Bluestone Road. Sethe's community exiled her after hearing about what she did to her child. Sethe had to live in a possessed house with no other company than her surviving daughter, Denver, for eighteen years. Finally, there was Sethe's racism towards the white community.

Based on her personal experiences, she has a right to think that white people are cruel. What she failed to realize is that not all white people are like that. She spent her life defending herself and what she did by blaming the people who held her captive during her earlier years. Although *Beloved* contains images of sex, violence, and animalistic behavior, it is the gruesome truth. When using the term brutally honest, Toni Morrison fits that category rather well.

## Conclusion

Slavery was an important part of country's history which needs to be remembered whether people want to acknowledge it or not. Before Toni Morrison even began writing the book, the page before it sums it up in four words, "*Sixty Million and more.*" This book provides an insight to the lives of slaves, many of whom died during the Middle Passage. Although some critics like **Charles Taylor** see Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as "*a horror story and periodic outbursts of gruesome melodrama used as illustrations in Morrison's hectoring lecture on the bloodiest sin on America's racist soul.*" Unfortunately for him, the truth of the matter is, is that *Beloved* is a real life horror story, which needs to be told so people like Charles Taylor can stop being ignorant of the fact that things like this really did happen. American was, and still is racist. Novels like *Beloved* can make an impact on America, and bring about a change for the better, by

exposing the truth. As **John Leonard** once said, “*I can’t imagine American literature without it.*”

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