

# The Impact of Slavery: Dealing with Experiences and Memories in "Beloved"

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i  
književnosti i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

Melany Vincelj

**Utjecaj ropstva: suočavanje s iskustvima i sjećanjima u romanu**

*Beloved*

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

Osijek, 2018.

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in *Beloved***

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in terms of the impact of slavery on the identity of the affected individuals and what does it take to move on and live a better life. The experienced trauma prevents characters in the novel to live a normal life and strive for something bigger and they learn that the only way of healing is confronting with the past and accepting it as a part of their personality, but not as a defining feature, but rather part of their background which should not affect their present. The first chapter of the paper is about the themes in African-American literature. The next part analyzes different types of slavery at Sweet Home. The next thing discussed are different ways of dealing with traumatic experiences based on the analysis of Baby Suggs', Sethe's, and Paul D's actions, attitudes and choices. The next chapter argues that Denver is an indirect victim of slavery and therefore the biggest hope for bright future. The conclusion portrays *Beloved* as the embodiment of the past which demands confrontation with suppressed trauma in order to heal properly.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, impact of slavery, past, healing

## Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* offers a wide range of topics to discuss, from the problem of slavery, motherhood, impairment of individuals due to slavery, all the way to the ethical question of right or wrong. This paper analyses strategies of dealing with the experience of former slaves and what is necessary for the healing in *Beloved*. The characters are aware of the immense influence of the past on their identity, they try to "keep the past at bay" and leave it behind, but each of their actions is deeply influenced by their traumatic experiences which determine their life choices and attitudes. The novel portrays the turning point in their lives, from which there is no more running away from the past and what they had experienced. They need to face it, to grapple with what they had been suppressing for twenty years in order to create a constructive and bright future opposed to the deconstructive way of life they had lived before *Beloved*. The paper opens with a short overview of African-American literature and its topics, Morrison's inspiration for the novel and its purpose. The second part of the paper deals with the different types of slavery depicted in the novel. The third chapter of the paper discusses the impact of slavery, its physical and psychological aspect and the consequences it had on slaves and their mentality. The next part focuses on the three characters in the novel, Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Paul D, and compares their strategies of dealing with the past and trying to incorporate it into their present life. The second last chapter deals with Denver as an indirect victim of slavery and hope for the future. The paper concludes with *Beloved*, as the embodiment of the past, being the only way of absolute healing.



## 1. African-American Literary Themes

Many African American authors dedicated their works to the biggest problem their race had ever experienced – slavery. Some of them experienced it directly, some indirectly, but there were specific consequences and restrictions for all African Americans living in America. Therefore, the two main topics in African American literature are slavery and life of African Americans after it; slavery as an oppressing system against the black race, the cruelty toward slaves and inhuman life conditions; life of African Americans after slavery in terms of the Fugitive Slave Act, segregation, and search for identity in a country they were forcefully brought to and had no rights there, but also had almost no chance of recuperating their African heritage generations after the first slaves had been brought to America.

The best-known literary work about slavery is *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave*, written by Douglass himself and published in 1845. In his work he describes the poor life conditions of slaves (or existence, because it was a bare survival) at his master's plantation, the severe punishing methods and cruelty which was afflicted upon slaves even without any reason. The most important point of his narrative is the relevance of education, it being the only reason of white people's domination over African Americans. Keeping slaves ignorant and even attempting to strip them of their intelligence and to dehumanize them, gave the slave owners the power to manipulate their slaves any way they wanted. This will be compared to Morrison's portrayal of slave owners to give an insight into different mentality between slave masters.

In many of her interviews Morrison discussed the inspiration for her Nobel Prize awarded novel. She claims that she got the inspiration for *Beloved* from several different sources. The most important, and the well-known one, is the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who committed infanticide in order to save herself and her family from being returned to slavery. However, Morrison did not do further research about Garner's story, but used only what she had read in the newspapers and created her version of a story about a mother impacted by slavery so profoundly that she chose to kill her child herself rather than watch it being killed every day by the slave-owning system. This story became one of Sethe's defining characteristics. The second influence was a photograph Morrison had seen, in which a dead girl was lying in a coffin. The story behind it fascinated her and gave her another motif to build in in her work – the extent of a woman's love. A girl was shot by a jealous boyfriend, but loved

him so much that she rather died, because she did not get the needed medical care in time, than told the truth and risked his going to jail. Both of these stories were compatible and appropriate for Morrison's idea of Sethe's character. The motif of incest, as Paul D perceives his intercourse with Beloved, comes from Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where Jim Trueblood admits having committed incest with his daughter. This is, however, the minor motif in the novel and is not much topicalized. The fourth, not mentioned but very important inspiration for the novel are the "Sixty Millions and more". This is tightly connected with the motif of slavery, which forms the background of the novel and influences the actions and personalities of characters in the present.

Morrison claims that, "if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor . . . we are, in fact, lost" and believes that it is important for the reconstructive memory. (Rushdy 2-4) Therefore, she claims, her novel is not about the slavery as a system, but about all the "Anonymous people called slaves" – what they have experienced and had to deal with, and what is left of them. She wrote the novel in spite of American denial of the slaveholding past and, by using a double perspective "of accusation and hope, of criticizing the past and caring for the future", she attempts to show that African Americans are the product of a cruel determinism, but also that it cannot break them, that they can overcome the hardships in life (Rushdy 9-10). Chapters of this paper analyse different aspects of slave life described in the novel, the impact on their mental condition and life after slavery, and the process of healing from the trauma.

## 2. Types of Slavery in *Beloved*

Not all types of slavery are the same. There were milder slave owners, there were stricter and even cruel slave owners. There are even types of slavery that people condemn themselves to, similar like Sethe condemned herself to *Beloved's* slavery. This chapter will analyse the difference between life of slaves at Sweet Home in time of Mr Garner and the changes caused by Schoolteacher's different perception of slaves.

### 2.1. Sweet Home and Garners

The life of slaves at Sweet Home during the Garner's regime can merely be called slavery. Since their plantation was not that big, six slaves were enough for them, and combined with Garner's good-hearted personality, their slaves were provided with much better life conditions than most of the slaves during the slaveholding period in America. "White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle.... red gums ready for their sweet white blood" (Morrison 234), but Garner confirms Stamp Paid's words, that this perception of African Americans is a result of white people's fear of the different race. Being of different mentality from other slave-owners, he never ascribed animalistic features to his slaves as other slave-owners did, but rather considered them to be "real men" because "...if you a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men too" (Morrison 12). Garner's slaves experienced something that Paul D believed no other slave in Kentucky had ever experienced – Garner was more of a father, a friend and a teacher for them, than their master. They were "allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to..." (Morrison 147). The fact that they had a chance to learn is the biggest difference between them and other slaves. Taken into consideration that many slaves were not even allowed to speak and were disciplined by having an iron bit in their mouth, this seems as if the Sweet Home slaves were free. During the long period that Baby Suggs served Mrs Garner at Sweet Home she was never mistreated, which is already a huge improvement compared to Schoolteacher's methods of "education" for instance. Baby Suggs was aware of this "special kind of slavery", where they were treated like paid labour and learnt things that, according to white people, slaves were not supposed to know, and

it worried her in some way because of her bad experiences with her former master, resulting in her questioning of Garner's purpose with his slaves.

However, after his death, everything changes. Schoolteacher believes him to have spoiled the slaves and gave them too much freedom, which resulted in their uncontrollability. He even considers Garner's mildness to be against the law. Sethe and Paul D often get nostalgic about life at Sweet Home before Schoolteacher, because they had all they needed back then – they were a family, with Mr Garner as the head of it, and “without his life, each of theirs fell to pieces” (Morrison 259).

## 2.2. Sweet Home and Schoolteacher

Mr Garner and Schoolteacher are like the two sides of the same medal. While Mr Garner was one of the best masters a slave could have, Schoolteacher was that ugly side of the slavery – a slave owner who would do anything to humiliate his slaves to the largest extent possible. He was the main reason of misery at Sweet Home and after his arrival the plantation is described as hell on earth. “...there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream... It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too” (Morrison 7). It seems as his whole experience at Sweet home was just part of his experiment upon slaves. Rushdy claims that “it is schoolteacher who uses writing in a detrimental way. Schoolteacher attempts to read and write Sethe as a subhuman thing by listing what he calls her "animal" characteristics alongside her human ones” (Rushdy 23). He went so far with the belief that slaves are of animalistic nature that he was observing them, making notes about their behaviour and appearance and tried to teach young men to think this way too – it was like creating his own ideology. He perceived slaves only in terms of working machines, children as spare resources, and a nice source of income if he decided to sell them. He strongly believed that slaves needed guidance of white people to live a “proper” life and not to get back to “the cannibal life they preferred” (Morrison 177). What he considered to be a proper life for a slave was nothing like Garner's way of treating them, but limitless obedience instead, and if they failed to do so, there was always the iron bit for stuffing their mouth, because he believed that the ability to speak made them most similar to “real humans”. The extent of the misery he caused for the Sweet Home slaves is described by the destruction of “the family” that Garner created out of his slaves – “One crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt, and me licking iron with my hands crossed behind me. The last of the Sweet Home men” (Morrison 86).

Schoolteacher is the pure embodiment of the cruelty of the slaveholding system, confirming that “definitions belonged to the definers [the master] – not the defined [the slave]” (Morrison 225). Exactly this word, “defined” lies behind the slavery as the institution; the slave owner has every right to “define” his slaves by any means he considers to be appropriate, in order to make his slaves what they are supposed to be – obedient human-like animals complying to their master’s requests and having no personal needs.

### 3. The Impact of Slavery on Characters

Physical punishment was an inevitable part of every slave's life. Next to the beatings and physical pain, this had a severe consequences on their psyche. Even if they managed to reach the free land, it was extremely hard for them to have a normal life. The following two chapters will analyse the two aspects of slavery – physical and psychological – portrayed in *Beloved*.

#### 3.1. Physical Impact

When thinking about the history of slavery the first thing that comes to mind is the physical impact that it had on slaves. All kinds of mistreating of slaves that Douglass talks about in his narrative are also present in Morrison's novel. However, this mistreatment never happened during Garner's regime at Sweet Home. It is either mentioned when Sethe or Baby Suggs remember the plantations they were previously at, or when describing Sweet Home after Schoolteacher's arrival. Physical punishment and violation of slave's body was his way of testing their bearability of oppression. The worst thing that could ever be used as means of discipline was wearing an iron bit in their mouth. It was meant to animalize and dehumanize slaves since it prevented them from using the only thing which makes human beings different from animals – language – and it was used at all ages: "Men, boys, little girls, women. The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye" (Morrison 84). The second worst things is rape of African American women, who, in most cases, got impregnated by their masters. It shows the master's domination over a female slave and determines her body as his property. Although not a character in the novel herself, Sethe's mother shows that the degree to which African American women were objectified and humiliated made it impossible for them to be a mother to a child conceived by this act. Sethe's mother was pregnant eight times with eight different men and decided to keep only Sethe because the father was of the same origin as she was, while the other seven men were all white. This shows the degree of the affliction which was so strong, that it was easier to accept bad consciousness due to committing infanticide, than to try being a proper mother to a child of a man toward whom she felt extreme disgust. Another important thing about Sethe's mother is that she was stamp-signed. Today is even the stamp signing of cattle often controversial and considered as torture since it causes extreme pain, but back then it was

completely natural to use this method as means of marking slaves as one's property. Unsuccessful attempt of running away would end in lynching. Caught slaves would be hanged on a tree and left there until their corpses were unrecognisable. This was both, a punishment for them and a warning what would happen to others if they tried something so dangerous, but pointless for the master, since he had every right to hunt his slave down. When Paul D and Sixo tried to escape, Schoolteacher decided to go an extra mile – burn Sixo alive and sell Paul D to Brandywine, a cruel slave owner, where Paul D had experienced a significant trauma. The ditches in which he spent numerous days with forty-five other men were a hell on earth for the shackled men:

The one thousand feet of earth – five feet deep, five feet wide, into which wooden boxes had been fitted. A door of bars that you could lift on hinges like a cage opened into three walls and a roof of scrap lumber and red dirt. Two feet of it over his head; three feet of open trench in front of him with anything that crawled or scurried welcome to share that grave calling itself quarters. (Morrison 125)

The time they spent there was literally looking the death in the eye, trying not to go mad, but to keep reasonable and, without communicating to each other, find a way to get out of the cages to save their lives. In one of the chapters Sethe names the horrible things that white people did to African Americans even in 1874, fourteen years after the official abolition of slavery. By doing so, it is meant to point out the struggle of African Americans even after gaining freedom, because not much has changed after the abolition:

Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. (Morrison 212)

### 3.2. Psychological Impact

What is even worse than physical impact of slavery is the psychological impact that it leaves. Bruises from the beatings fade and the iron bit is taken out of the mouth, but the trauma that the whole experience leaves is indelible and needs a lot of effort to learn to deal with it

properly. Florian Bast argues that the novel portrays slavery as “a system which consciously inflicts horrible psychological wounds on African Americans” (Bast 6). Characters are systematically dehumanized throughout the novel as Schoolteacher tries to separate their human characteristics from their animalistic features. Moglen claims that, since they are denied the basic human rights and are not seen as a part of society, but only in terms of working hands as if they really were animals, slaves are also denied of identification as a man or a woman (Moglen 12). They are perceived as male and female, but they do not have the same roles as men and women in white society. According to the mentality of slave owners, this does not give them the right to choose their spouse (or even the right to get married), and their sexuality serves mainly for the production of the new “working machines” and profit for the master if he decides to sell the children. This “producing” function is the main cause of the loose relationship between mothers and their children in this system. “The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn’t worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway” (Morrison 163). Children were taken away from their mothers right after the birth and families were destroyed by selling their members to different slave owners in order to weaken the relationship between them. The slave owners were literally implementing the feeling of alienation in their slaves as means of keeping them subordinated. Since characters in the novel are affected by slavery to such an extent that they cannot divide the time spent at Sweet Home from their memories of it, the novel deals primarily with the way they cope with their past and suggests that only confrontation is the way to recovery and reclaiming themselves.



## 4. Dealing with the Experience and Memories

Rose Lucas defines dealing with the impact of slavery like this: “On both physical and psychological levels it is a process first of recognising where the damage has been done, then, as does Amy with Sethe's torn and rotting feet, of gently coaxing the battered and numbed flesh back into memory and sensation, and finally, of learning to live without denying the scars, the irredeemable dead tissue which will result from the experience” (Lucas 2). The subsequent chapters will analyse Baby Suggs', Sethe's, and Paul D's way of dealing with the past which determines their lives greatly.

### 4.1. Baby Suggs

As the novel opens, Baby Suggs is lying in her bed, sick of life and craving for colours. Sethe claimed that Baby Suggs was disappointed with life so many times that freedom meant nothing to her once she got it, which is not quite true. It is undeniable that she had a rough time before Sweet Home, taken into account that she had had eight children, who were all, except for Halle, taken away from her, and physical punishment, which left a permanent scar in form of a broken hip. She herself did not believe that freedom would have a positive effect on her life, since she was under the oppression of slavery too long to perceive herself as an individual worth of happiness. Her identity was taken away from her to the extent that she could not even describe her personality, features or abilities:

She knew more about [her children] than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a lovely mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favour me? If my mother knew me would she like me?” (Morrison 165)

It is pitiful that a grown-up woman knows more about her children, who were taken away from her (and the only thing she could actually remember was how much her first-born liked the burnt crust of a bread), than about herself. Despite the feeling of unworthiness, she felt different the moment she stepped on the free ground of the Ohio state. It was as if she was reborn – she perceived her hands as her own property and heard her heartbeat for the first time. As a symbolic transition from Baby-Suggs-a-slave to Baby-Suggs-a-free-African-American, she decided to

change her name from Jenny Withlow, the one that was written on her sales ticket, to Baby Suggs, a nickname her husband gave her and his last name, because these two were “all she had left of [her] husband” (Morrison 168). It was like creating a new identity as the first step of reclaiming herself.

Next to the change of her identity, she also changes her way of thinking. She goes from a slave mentality, meaning work and submission, to an open-minded individual aware of her real worth, not the one in money. She becomes the spiritual leader of the African-American community which she is part of and teaches them that they are the owners of their bodies. The Clearing becomes her church and members of the community are her apostles who need her preaching to learn that they deserve better than how they had been treated and that they need to love their bodies because white people hate it and would do anything to make them miserable (Morrison 103-4). She claimed that they can have the grace they can imagine, which proves that she has outgrown the subordinating mentality and slave-owners making decisions for them. Dobbs characterises Baby Suggs’ words as “the words of the flesh” (Dobbs 4), the words against the oppression of slaves, which the community needed to heal from the trauma. Zamalin argues that Baby Suggs’ heart is like her home – opened to everyone. Her generosity and emotional support are available to everyone as part of the ethical imperative and not as a calculated move (Zamalin 5). However, this new Baby Suggs breaks into pieces only twenty-eight days after Sethe’s arrival. After Sethe’s crime, Baby Suggs gives up on preaching and active participating in life and spends the rest of her life in bed thinking about colours, because she wanted to “fix to something harmless in this world” (Morrison 211), as if she thought that searching for herself and happiness was wrong and she had to be punished for that. However, she did not blame Sethe for what she did or how it affected the life of the whole family, but Schoolteacher instead. She believed that nothing could erase the fact that white people came into her yard and believed them to be the only bad luck in life because they want to take everything and do not know when to stop (Morrison 104-5).

#### 4.2. Sethe

Sethe’s personality as we know it in the novel has been influenced by different things throughout her life and some aspects of her mental state are even observable in her physical features. There is not much description of Sethe’s looks throughout the novel, (there are in fact only two things) that, next to describing her appearance, symbolize her mental condition. Her

eyes are described as all black, which symbolizes the emptiness inside her. She had never seen the chokecherry tree on her back, but assumes that after eighteen years it might even have flowers, meaning that, just like a tree progresses from a tiny plant to a bigger one with flowers and leaves, so are her memories becoming worse and the past is getting after her. One of the main things that influenced Sethe's personality is the absence of a mother figure in her life. Although Sethe was the only child that her mother did not throw away since she was not a product of rape, there was no mother-daughter relationship established between them and therefore, Sethe is looking for a replacement her whole life. She was nursed by Nan along with other children and her only memory of mother is a figure working in the field. After her arrival at Sweet Home, Nan was replaced by Mrs Garner, whom she often asked different questions and confided in her about her taken milk, at the same time indirectly asking for protection. After she had escaped from Sweet Home, Baby Suggs became a replacement for her mother – a person she could trust and ask for advice. Since she knew nothing about motherhood, she tried to remember what other women did at the plantation before Sweet Home and as a mother herself, she attempts to provide her children with things she never had, especially love and security. After Schoolteacher's nephews took her milk, she became aware that there is no aspect of her body that she could claim as her own and it is the main reason why her children are her "best thing" and not she herself. The worst thing for her was not the violence upon her body, but her taken milk, which she believed to be the most precious thing she had for her children, taken into account that she had never had milk to claim for herself. Caesar claims that Sethe's own infanticide is predestined by her mother's infanticide (Caesar 5), but opposite of her mother, who did it out of disgust, Sethe does it out of love for her children and believes that it was the right thing to do. She herself said that "motherlove is a killer", but answers to Paul D's accusations that her love is "too thick" by saying that "love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (Morrison 195), which indicates that her image of a family is distorted by her experience, which is the main reason why she would do anything to save her children, even kill them if that meant that they would be "safe". It is even argued that Sethe's killing of her baby represents "the collective anguish African women must have experienced when they realized their children were cut off forever from their "living dead" who would never be called upon, remembered or fed" (Christian 11). As we get to know about her sons, it is also said that she could hardly remember their faces anymore, but she remembered Sweet Home clear as day, which is supported by her claim that "places are eternal" (Morrison 43). They might not exist in the physical sense, but they remain there in one's mind, which makes her relive her experience once again as she sees Schoolteacher and is a reason strong enough for her to put her children

“where they would be safe” (Morrison 184). By killing her “already-crawling?” baby Sethe shows that slavery sometimes leads to radical actions in order to save oneself and their loving ones from it. This is the first part of dealing with past, namely being a slave, which was then the beginning of a new period in her life and dealing with another part of her past, being the murderer of her own child.

Sethe was accepted as a member of the community from the first day at 124 and the first twenty-eight days of her freedom were days of learning about herself and reclaiming her body as her own property. However, Morrison points out that she has lost this freedom when she killed her baby girl – she has become a slave of her action. After being released from prison, she walked down her yard with her head high, as if she had nothing to be ashamed of and decided to isolate her family from the community which judged her action. What she was not aware of is that they mainly judged her because of her pride and lack of repentance, and not so much for what she had done. Instead of making the first step, both sides decided to ignore the other one, which resulted in years of isolation for Sethe’s family and coping with the baby ghost. As Paul D suggests moving out to get away from the ghost pestering 124, Sethe refuses it, explaining that she had run away once and it cost too much, referring to her lost child. Her unwillingness to move out can be interpreted as sticking to the past and the baby ghost as a way of making up to the baby for what she had done. Maybe she thought this is the way to keep the baby “alive”, but it becomes obvious at the end of the novel that Beloved is there to punish her and not to make up for the lost time. As Paul D gets rid of the ghost, she starts to believe that he is her chance of progress and better future and decides not to tell him about the murder, aware of the possibility that he might leave her.

Yet, this changes once Beloved becomes part of their lives. Sethe sees her return as an erasure of the murder and a chance to relive the past time in a better way. She starts to ignore Paul D, but also Denver, whom she treated differently from Beloved. She did not mind too much attention received from Beloved, but she would be annoyed if Denver did it; she could not talk about her past to Denver, but it did not hurt to talk about it to Beloved, and she did not realise that it is so because Beloved is part of the past and Denver is future-oriented, asking about the past just so she would know something about her identity. Once she realises that Beloved is her daughter, she gets a twisted idea about reuniting her family, convinced that, if Beloved could have returned from the dead, her sons might have return to her as well. She believes that all she needs is inside her house, gets fired and instead of looking for a new job in order to provide for her family, she gives up on everything except Beloved, who gets all her

attention. Although she tries to “keep the past at bay” it is obvious that she is a past-oriented character, because all her experiences are still alive in her mind. Parker believes that she desperately tries to justify herself to Beloved because she cannot accept the past as past, but instead tries to relive it, which results in evaporation of the present, namely her own deterioration (Parker 14). Her relationship with Beloved goes from mutually expressed love to justifying and not accepting explanation at first and then to providing and asking for more, which shows that Sethe had no authority over Beloved and her terror, just like she had no authority over her memories and experience. Although she claimed finally being possible to “look at things” (Morrison 222) now that Beloved was back and never admitted feeling guilty for what she had done, it is obvious that she does feel guilty, letting Beloved consume her to the fullest. She becomes completely overwhelmed by Beloved and is incapable to live a normal life or think rationally, which shows that Sethe is the real victim in their relationship and she is the one who needs help from the community.

The final test she had to pass in order to confront her past to the fullest was the encounter with Mr Bodwin, whom she identified with Schoolteacher, but this time she went for “the attacker” and not for her endangered children. The novel ends with Sethe lying in the same bed Baby Suggs died in, waiting for death, but with a chance of healing. Rose argues that Sethe “has survived, and she is free of the literal chains of slavery, but she will never be free of the physical and psychological scarring which her experiences have inscribed upon her” (Rose 2), but Paul D, whose story is the same as hers, can be the mediator in her reconciliation with past and attempt of healing. Therefore, Amy’s words “anything dead coming back to life” (Morrison 42) originally refer to Sethe’s sore feet, but can be interpreted in terms of the generations of African-American former slaves who needed to face their painful experiences in order to overcome them and to reclaim themselves. Just like them, Sethe could not progress before opening the door of her past and confronting it, no matter how hard and painful it is.

### 4.3. Paul D

By analyzing Paul D’s character, we get the actual degree of the degradation which was afflicted upon slaves. As the last of the Sweet Home men, he is the one who has experienced the worst of the slavery – being owned by the cruellest slave owners, chained, collared, unable to speak, even raped in order to make him aware that he is worthless as a human being. He himself says that Schoolteacher broke into pieces what Garner had shaped into self-confident

men. The physical impact of slavery that he had experienced has resulted in an even worse mental damage to his character. As a punishment for having tried to escape, he wore an iron bit in his mouth, which deprived him of the main feature that human beings possess, namely the ability of speaking. During these days, he was only able to observe the world (just like animals do), but he could not express his opinion or his feelings about different stuff. The most striking observation he makes about his identity and self-confidence is comparing himself to Mister, a rooster at Sweet Home who “looked at him” all proud because he was free to do what he wanted and had more privileges, unlike Paul D who was Schoolteacher’s property. “Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. 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” (Morrison 86). After Schoolteacher’s tyranny, he experienced being shackled and put into a tight wooden box similar to a coffin, with a couple of feet of ground above his head, which was not much different from being buried after death. Once they set themselves free and got to a Cherokee camp, he was the last one of the forty-six slaves there, because he had no plan what to do next. As he decided to go north, it becomes a way of life for him – walking forward, because he stood at one place for too long (referring to Sweet Home), as if he could escape from the past if he continued to walk on. Gradually progressing to the North, he managed to lock his experiences in the “tobacco tin” inside his chest and believed that he did not have to confront it anymore. However, once he gets to Sethe and decides that maybe it is time to settle down, the door of his past open and he cannot escape anymore. In his initial conversation he tells Sethe that although he looks good physically, he feels bad, which indicates his awareness of being deeply scarred. His greatest issue is the deprivation of manhood caused by systematic oppression and humiliation. As a consequence of Schoolteacher’s and Brandywine’s slaveholding methods, he has lost every aspect of self-confidence and starts to doubt Garner’s claim that they are men just like white people are:

It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner’s gift or his own will? What would he have been anyway – before Sweet Home – without Garner? In Sixo’s country, or his mother’s? Or, God help him, on the boat?” (Morrison 260)

He believes that the only “worth thing” about him is his body, which is worth nine hundred dollars. This made him wonder about the value of other slaves at Sweet Home, comparing himself to others because he never felt good enough. Another aspect of affliction of slavery is his claim that Sethe’s love is “too thick”, based on the presupposition that slaves should not

have strong feelings for other slaves. He could not accept Sethe's murder as means of being ready to do anything to save her children from the danger, but he did something similar when he decided not to run away before finding his brothers, Paul A and Paul F, to make sure they are safe too. During his journey he met all kinds of people with big families and wanted to hear their stories, which made him both amazed and envious because his only family were people at Sweet Home and there was no one left except for Sethe. He sees the possibility of regaining his masculinity in form of having a baby with her and creating his own family. Bieber Lake claims that Paul D comes into Sethe's and Denver's life as "a productive father" and a possibility of the new, happier future (Bieber Lake 8). However, just like Sethe, he needs to confront the past in order to progress in life and the confrontation with memories is once again embodied in Beloved's character. What he perceives as an incestuous act was actually a deliberating experience for him. He claims that Beloved "moved him" out of 124, which indicates that he is still under control of the past. "Only when Paul D relinquishes himself to the power of memory, giving himself physically to Beloved, can he release those memories, accept himself for what he is and what he has done – and therefore Sethe for what she is and what she has done -, and thereby become whole" (Page 8). She opened his rusted "tobacco tin" and made it possible for him to accept his past as part of him, but not to define his life anymore. She made it possible for him, to understand Sethe's actions and hope for the better tomorrow because "[they] got more yesterday than anybody. [They] need some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison 322).

#### 4.4. The Significance of the African-American Community

In her article, Christina Bieber Lake argues, that "carnival represents everything that Sethe does not have: activity, fun, community, change, and new possibilities. Carnival celebrates a common humanity; it is the place where we laugh at ourselves, especially at our embodied existence. In this way, carnival epitomizes the positive grotesque, exaggerating the fact that our bodies are always changing, growing, transforming" (Bieber Lake 8).

The carnival also symbolises the connection between the members of the African American community in the novel. Since they were "ripped off" from their motherland generations before and were systematically oppressed by the white slave-owning culture, they never got the chance to celebrate their identity and identify themselves with the African heritage. They were always treated as not more worth than animals or even less, and once getting their freedom back, they got the chance to "reclaim themselves", to perceive themselves as human beings and not

someone else's property. In that sense, the tight bond between the members of the community is their last chance to preserve their African heritage and express it through their way of life.

This community was of great importance for Baby Suggs – she finally felt that she belonged somewhere – but she was also very important to them because she taught them how to love themselves – something that they were never taught before. However, the community did feel a certain apathy toward Baby Suggs after her feast, because they considered that she was “taking over God's rightful position” (Bieber Lake 16). Just like they accepted Baby Suggs at the beginning, they accepted Sethe as well and gave her an opportunity to become part of them. An even greater mistake was their failure to warn Sethe that Schoolteacher was after her and to protect her. Although they signed a petition to save her from death punishment for her crime, as a result of their strong repulsion toward her act, they didn't attempt to get Sethe back into their community after she isolated herself.

However, this same community saved her from her near destruction, with the white woman, Ella Bodwin, acting as catalyser for their action. She, who judged Sethe the most, decided to intervene after finding out that Sethe is being “eaten out” by the incarnation of her past mistake – something Ella could not accept, mostly because of the disgust she felt, when thinking that her infanticide could have had such a consequence too. “She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion” (Morrison 302). She had outgrown the need to dwell on the past, and by exorcising Beloved, she stopped the past from consuming the present and “offer[ed] Sethe the [second] opportunity to reclaim herself” (Bieber Lake 19). The whole community showed their good-heartedness by helping Denver and her family in need, which was a sign that, despite Sethe's mistake, they were ready to give her a new chance.

As a rememory of the Middle Passage (discussed in the conclusion), Beloved is not only Sethe's problem, but the problem of the whole community, which demands the action of the whole group. Beloved is a metaphor of the pain all African Americans have felt while they were slaves, but also a metaphor of the pain left, which needs to be confronted every day. In order to survive, as it is depicted on Sethe's character, the past needs to be exorcised because “remembering seemed unwise” (Morrison 324).



## 5. Denver – an Indirect Victim of Slavery

Life in a “spiteful house, full of baby venom” (Morrison 24) cannot be easy. After her brothers had fled and her grandma died, Denver was left living with her mother and the ghost of the dead baby, which tortured them on the daily basis. She is an indirect victim of slavery in terms of not having experienced slavery herself, but her mother’s experience and actions caused by it, which then influenced Denver’s life. “It had been a long time since anybody . . . sat at their table . . . For twelve years, long before Grandma Baby died, there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends” (Morrison 33). Therefore, isolation from the community results in her fear of the world outside the boundaries of Bluestone Road 124. Her communication with the world is reduced only to conversing with her mother, who is unwilling to talk about the past, which is crucial for Denver. Once Paul D comes to 124, she starts to feel like an outsider, because she is not the part of “their story”, namely Sethe’s and Paul D’s experience at Sweet Home. The past is so important to her because of her father; talking about the past is the only way she can find out something about him, and the fact that nobody can confirm that he is dead, gives her hope that he will come one day and save her from living with a mother capable of killing her children if needed. Rushdy believes that she went deaf rather than ask her mother about the murder as “an easy way out” and with Beloved’s presence at 124 the time to confront the truth comes (Rushdy 15). She accepts the presence of the ghost because it “held for her all the anger, love and fear she didn’t know what to do with” (Morrison 103); the anger she felt toward her mother and the way of life she was condemned to; love for her brothers and grandmother, who had left her all alone, but also love toward the ghost as the only company left; and fear that “the thing” that made Sethe kill once is still living inside her and might make her kill again, Denver being the only potential victim, which made her afraid of any physical contact with her mother and resulted in faked affection as a defence mechanism.

All these reasons justify Denver’s unusual affection for the stranger girl and why she nourishes her for all the days she spent in bed sick. Having sick Beloved means having someone who needs her help, which makes Denver feel useful and fills out her days which were monotonous earlier at Bluestone 124. Beloved is Denver’s escape from the loneliness and Denver wants to keep her in the house at any price.

Not until the scene with the dancing and Beloved’s words “You may as well just come on.” (Morrison 74), does Denver realise that this girl is her dead sister’s ghost and begs her not to abandon them as a consequence of her lonely life before Beloved became part of it. Over

time, she realises that Beloved only cares for Sethe, as if she has eyes only for her mother, but she persists in trying to get her attention for herself:

Denver is a strategist now and has to keep Beloved by her side from the minute Sethe leaves for work until the hour of her return when Beloved begins to hover at the window, then work her way out the door, down the steps and near the road. Plotting has changed Denver markedly. Where she was once indolent, resentful of every task, now she is spry, executing, even extending the assignments Sethe leaves for them. (Morrison 121)

Salvatore claims that she is just as overprotective over Beloved as Sethe is over all of her children (Salvatore 7). An example how charmed she is by Beloved is the time all three women go to the Clearing and Sethe has someone's fingers around her neck, choking her. Although she is sure that it was Beloved's fault, she does not say a thing to her mother because she needs Beloved in her life, "everybody had somebody but her" (Morrison 104). "Denver was alarmed by the harm she thought Beloved planned for Sethe, but felt helpless to thwart it . . ." (Morrison 104) because she is aware of her mother's love that is so strong that she is ready to kill her children in order to shield them from harm. Aware of Sethe's ability to kill, Denver sees Beloved as the victim and she is determined to protect her from Sethe, instead of doing the opposite. "I have to warn her about that. Don't love [Sethe] too much. Don't. Maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children. I have to tell [Beloved]. I have to protect her" (Morrison 206).

However, toward the end of the novel, Denver becomes aware of the danger Beloved brings and it motivates her to act in order to save her family. As Beloved becomes more and more demanding, Denver becomes aware that it is not Beloved, but rather her mother who needs protection; protection from her past and guilt which are draining her out. As Denver is excluded from Beloved's and Sethe's rituals and games, she is the only one aware of the real condition and the seriousness of the situation and decides to confront the past which is intruding her life in shape of Beloved and endangering her future. That is also the moment when she takes over the responsibility for her family, which includes leaving her house and asking for help from the whole community. By asking for a job and explaining the state of affairs at 124, she gets the whole community involved as they provide food for her family. That way, she becomes part of the community herself and gets the help her family needs to get their lives back as they were before Beloved.

Scholars identify Denver as the daughter of hope and future, while Beloved is the daughter of the past and Rushdy portrays them as two complete opposites: “Beloved accuses while Denver embraces; Beloved is unforgiving while Denver is loving; Beloved will be “dismembered and unaccounted for” while Denver is the source of remembering” (Rushdy 18). By taking over the responsibility, Denver steps out of her comfort zone and grows into a mature and responsible young woman who knows to recognize a serious situation and is able to find a solution for it. By asking for help, Denver enables for Sethe to reclaim herself and to free herself from past, while Beloved kept her chained to the past and what she had done. What is important is that she does not only bring to personal healing by her actions, but also to communal healing, taken into account that Beloved represents the cultural trauma and affects the African American community in general.

## Conclusion: Beloved as Confrontation with the Past and the Way to Healing; the Memory of the Middle Passage

Several scholars claim that Beloved, next to being the embodiment of the past and a memory of the Middle Passage, also imposes a certain type of slavery upon other characters in the novel. What makes her slavery different is the method she uses; instead of oppression, she chooses seduction. Bieber Lake claims that strangling hands of an excessive love are the same as a circle of iron, which makes Beloved's love and need for Sethe equal to slavery (Bieber Lake 17). She has power over other characters and can control them in order to achieve what she wants. As the embodiment of the past, she controls Paul D through his unacceptance of his experience and has the power to "move him" out of the house and away from Sethe. She can control Denver because of her desperate need for company based on years of isolation and fear that Sethe could hurt her too, which results in Denver's overprotectiveness over Beloved and makes her unable to see that Sethe is the real victim. She controls Sethe based on the guilt caused by the murder. In her article "Demonic in Service of the Divine" Bieber Lake identifies Beloved with a demon from the past protruding the present in order to overtake control of the characters' lives. Holloway identifies her as the confrontation of the "killing history" which characters are trying to forget and the "disabling present" which offers no future if not confronted with the past first (Holloway 8). The way Beloved follows Sethe obsessively and wants to hear stories about "her diamonds", Sethe's ma'am doing her hair and similar things is actually an indirect way of making her talk about her experience and come to terms with her past. Beloved says that she is back for Sethe's face, which corresponds to her "consumption" of Sethe both physically and mentally and her getting bigger and plumper every day shows that she is slowly taking Sethe's life away. Lake believes that her main task is to persuade Sethe that time is cyclical and that she will never come to terms with the feeling of guilt, but she is also necessary for Sethe to heal completely.

When it comes to Paul D, Beloved wants him out of 124 because he is interfering with her taking control over Sethe's life by means of offering her a better future, while Beloved wanted revenge and the feeling of guilt to stay. On the other hand, Beloved was crucial for his healing. "You *have* to touch me. On the inside part. And you *have* to call me my name. (...) Please call it. I'll go if you call it." (Morrison 137; emphasis added). Intercourse with Beloved seemed like an incest to Paul D, but her words and the whole act had much deeper significance; since she was the embodiment of his past, he had to touch it "on the inside part" and call it its

name, namely let it out of his tobacco tin and confront it in order to be able to move on without still feeling shackled by his past experience. Although the past has shaped his personality immensely, he heals faster than Sethe because he has nothing to hold onto in the past, he wants to leave it behind, while Sethe tries to save Beloved this time and cannot stand losing her child once again.

Once Sethe and Paul D confront what they have been suppressing, there is no space for Beloved in their lives and she has to disappear. Beloved once told Denver how she would fall apart if she was alone, which shows her dependence on someone in order to survive because she cannot be no one's past or be someone's forgotten past. She needs to be remembered every day and be an "active part" of one's life (like she was for Sethe) in order to live on. The last chapter in the novel narrates how a naked woman with fish instead of hair has been seen in the woods and her footprints are often found by the stream. They "come and go, come and go" and they fit to everyone's footprints, meaning that, although not part of life of African Americans anymore, their past and experience will never completely fade. Those footprints are a symbol of cultural trauma they suffered and Beloved is the embodiment of their past, lurking from the edge of the woods (or their recalling of the past), threatening to swallow them and take their good judgement away if not dealing with her properly.

Morrison vividly describes the horrific conditions on transporting ships in form of Beloved's traumatic memories. However, she does not do it in order to reprimand slavery at its very beginning, but rather to commemorate all the slaves who are anonymous and forgotten, referring to the indefinite number of slaves who had lost their lives during the voyages from their motherland to America. The fact that the "Already-crawling?" baby has no real name until the burial, when Sethe chooses "Beloved" to be written on her tombstone, refers to the anonymity of the slaves whose names are long forgotten. Morrison has made Beloved's voice the voice of those victims, who are dead, but "their souls seem to live on, on the other side, existing in a place that sounds a lot like a conventional description of the eternal torments of hell" (Bieber Lake 11). She also identifies Beloved's obsession and exaggerated love with the claim of those victims who should have been given the right to live and to be loved. Parker claims her to be not only the ghost of Sethe's baby girl, but an ancestral spirit serving as a memory of the African ancestors and supports his claim with Denver's words that, at times, she thought Beloved to be more than her sister (Parker 13). Beloved's story is the story of the whole African American community depicting the collective loss: "the deprivation of home, abandonment by an enslaved mother, the erasure of a disinherited father, the alienation of her

body in rape and of her mind in the shattering of the mirror of identity” (Moglen 8). *Beloved*’s story is “not a story to pass on”, but her story lives not only in the memory of those who had experienced slavery, but also in the memory of their offspring and the whole world and therefore it always remains at the edge of recalling and cannot be forgotten completely. Page argues that her story had to be passed on. “Just as Sethe and Paul D could not pass on their memories but had to, just as Denver could not enter the world but had to, just as Sethe could not harm her children but had to, so the story could not be passed on, but had to be” (Page 9). Rushdy even claims that Denver, listening to Sethe talking about the past to *Beloved* and then passing it on by asking for help from the community, is a symbol of oral literary tradition (Rushdy 20). Another interpretation of “not a story to pass on” is that her story must be retold, but never repeated (Parker 17).

To sum up, although Morrison’s novel seems to be a typical novel about slavery, it is much more than that. It is a novel about life after slavery, full of hardships and difficult choices. It is a novel about scared individuals aware of their insufficiencies, letting their traumatic experiences control the present. They have been trying to close the door of the past and continue with life, but this is possible for them only once they confront the past and come to terms with what they had experienced, their actions and their mistakes. Only then can they leave it behind and focus on the better future.

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