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## The Conundrum Facing Beloved

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Beloved herself is an enigma that nobody seems capable of explaining. From a "pool of red and undulating light" (p.8) her state transforms from the supernatural to that of flesh and blood. But why has she returned? Out of love? Spite? Revenge? She seduces Paul D, drains the energy from Sethe and yet always seems to invent more desire, whether it be for sweets, stories, or explanations. Her return is marked by her ever-present interdependent relationship with Sethe, and yet she treats her mother with such ferocious attention that Denver's loyalty switches from Beloved herself to that of her mother's safety. Throughout the novel, Beloved seems more trouble than anything else, and yet she inadvertently helps the characters in the book overcome their individual obstacles. Beloved haunted 124 in the ghostly state for eighteen years, and yet her tantrums were merely rationalized by "the baby's fury at having its throat cut" (p.5). However, there is a greater purpose for these "quaking" fits (p.18) that Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver, and the rest of the community remain oblivious of, a purpose that can only be defined with the physical return of Beloved. She brings about change in the different characters, and yet she is able to bring everyone closer as a community to acknowledge the wrongs of slavery. She starts the painful process of 'rememory', bringing memories back to life, and works for the greater purpose of healing for the future.

Beloved asks questions of Sethe, things that only Sethe would know. Beloved asks if Sethe's mother ever fixed her hair, and though seemingly such a simple question, it is this inquiry that starts Sethe down the long path of 'rememory'. Sethe remembers things about her mother that she had put away in her subconscious years ago, facts that she had willingly forgotten. With the plain, straightforward question "Your woman she never fix up you hair?" (p.63) Sethe's memory is triggered and she finds herself readily "picking meaning out of a code that she no longer [understands]" (p.62). Sethe has spent so long "beating back the past" (p.73) that she is amazed at how easily she can recall it. She remembers that her mother threw away all her babies except Sethe herself, the daughter of the only man she physically loved willingly. Her mother committed infanticide a number of times out of the inability to love whereas Sethe killed Beloved because her "love was too thick". Sethe had suffered through life, "every mention of her past life hurt" (p.58) and although the murder of her daughter was savage it was not heartless nor without reason. She wanted to save her children from the life of slavery that the schoolteacher was sure to bring them back to, and in effect she saved Beloved from a life that her mother herself had not saved her from. She recalls that her mother was hung for running away, and yet perhaps what hurts Sethe the most is not the pain of the loss but the knowledge that her mother abandoned her, leaving her behind to live a life that she herself had deemed worth the risk of death. Sethe strives to be the perfect mother to her children, and yet because

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she did not have a consistent relationship with her own mother, she is deprived of the knowledge of what it is to be a mother. It is upon the assumption of freedom that Sethe is left uncertain of her role as a mother, for before her role was that of a slave whereas now her purpose is supported by inexperience, and is less clearly defined. Beloved says that at Sweet Home Sethe "never waved goodbye or even looked her way before running away from her" (p.242), and yet Sethe cannot be blamed for this for it was her back-breaking work as a slave that made it impossible for Sethe to properly care for her children. Similarly, Sethe's community of freed slaves blames Sethe for her immoral behavior instead of properly condemning the establishment of enslavement that forces Sethe to take such an action.

As a generation of a newly freed people, the ex-slaves are lost as to their present purpose. Sethe's primary concern is to keep her family intact, and when the only possession she has, the milk saved for her children, is robbed from her, she is forced to save her children the only way she knows how. She has been exposed to the violence of slavery her entire life, and therefore it makes sense that she should try to save what is most important to her through similar methods. Sethe justifies her attempts at murder with the logic that her plans were "always that they would all be together on one side, forever" (p.241). She remains affected by her past experiences, and refuses to move away from 124 in case Halle ever returns. When she recognizes that Beloved is the reincarnation of the daughter that she lost eighteen years previously, her hope is re-ignited for the return of her two boys and the reunification of her family. Her optimism is boldly contrasted by the sad acceptance of broken families around her. Baby Suggs loses all of her children except Halle who disappears mysteriously, Ella is kept locked away for years and refuses to nurse the child she bears, and Stamp Paid gives up his wife to his master's son. The reader is able to see how the institution of slavery takes its toll on the familial life of blacks, and how Sethe would rather kill her family than further advance the horrible cycle of bondage that she has had first hand experience with.

The irony of the fact lies that while she tries to protect her children from slavery, they in effect fall victim to the ways of the outside world because of their mother's efforts. Beloved is dead, despite the fact that she returns to 124. She is nothing more than a living ghost, bringing to the surface Sethe's pent-up guilt and taunting her with the love and acceptance that she has craved from her dead child for so long. And it is because of the murder of Beloved that Buglar and Howard run away from Sethe, for they are fearful of the young baby's wrath and Sethe herself. They teach Denver "die-witch-die" games, so that Denver can protect herself when the time comes, so sure are they that the danger at home is greater than away from it. The reader gets a look into Denver's thoughts, just a taste of what growing up, locked inside 124 was like: "Buglar and Howard told me [Sethe] would and she did... She cut my head off every night" (p.206). Denver is scared of her mother, fearful of what her mother is capable of doing. When Paul D first comes to 124, Denver makes perfectly clear her desire to experience the world and to have a relationship with someone other than her mother, to know what she is being kept from. Sethe

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feels that despite Denver's wishes, she knows all too well the explicit brutality of the outside, and then only she can provide the "milk" that her children need. What Denver does recognize, however, is the brutality that lies within her mother. Denver is alienated in her own house, "...like I was somebody [Sethe] found and felt sorry for" (p.206), her only companionship was the ghost of her murdered sister, Beloved. Denver spent "all of [her] outside time loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill [her]", aurally blocking out her own mother, waiting for a time when she would be rescued by her father and taken into the world outside the gates of 124.

Paradoxically, Denver is isolated because of the death of her sister, and yet she develops the tools needed to venture out into the world because of Beloved. Beloved's questions spark Denver's ability to form stories on her own, without Sethe's narrative guiding her. Denver is able to give them a "heartbeat" (p.78), and independently discipline her own desires to keep Beloved satisfied. Both of these devices are especially important and balanced in the respect that the former follows Baby Suggs', holy, cry for "love! Love it love it...the beat and beating heart" (p.88) and the latter's practical uses in the world of labor, where one must learn how to adjust to the needs of others. By the third section, Denver is able to objectively see Beloved's negative effects on Sethe. Beloved creates a strong bond with Sethe that Denver cannot penetrate, reinforcing the skills of independence that Denver has acquired, and she is tested when Beloved starts sucking away Sethe's energy. Denver succeeds in reaching out to the community that has shunned her and her mother, for she has now developed the maturity that she never would have had without Beloved.

Similarly, Beloved invokes a change in Paul D that he had been opposed to, with good reason, for a good part of his life. She seduces him, and he is overcome with a power that he is not able to resist, the "tobacco tin lodged in his chest... that nothing in this world could pry open" (p.113) was hiding his terrible experiences of past. "Bringing things back to life hurts" Amy says and sure enough, when Paul D has sex with Beloved, it hurts him impulsively because of the emotional complexities of the memories that are being 'rememoried'. Initially, he doesn't realize the effect Beloved has on him, "he didn't hear the flakes of rust made as they fell away from the sides of his tobacco tin" (p.117), but by the time he realizes that she's undoing the hardened person he's become, it's too late and with his cries of "Red heart," he's already opened up. Although he may be physically touching Beloved on the inside, it is she that is metaphorically reaching him on the inside, for really, she is not of this world, and is fully capable of releasing the cloud of chaos and grief that his past has been.

Paul D and Denver both learn the wisdom of Baby Suggs, holy, for even though they themselves were not ever witness to her speaking in the Clearing, her message of loving themselves, their flesh, their "red hearts" is carried on. It is clear now that Beloved's return gives her family the tools they need to address their history as slaves in the present and live happily in the future. Sethe killed Beloved to protect her family, and yet with Beloved's help, Sethe was

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better able to explain to herself the reasoning behind her own actions. Beloved helps her family come to grips with their pasts, and yet it is her own enigmatic past that is so intriguing to the reader. With cryptic descriptions, Beloved says she comes from a place where there are "some who eat nasty themselves" and "men without skin" pushing dead blacks into the sea (p.210). The narration reminds one of a slave ship importing blacks who "crouch" where there is "no room to" (p.211). Although her speech is somewhat scattered, it sounds as if Beloved comes from a place filled with angry dead people. "The little hill of dead people" are being cleared away, perhaps making room for the survivors of the ship ride over. Here, Beloved represents the untold lives of forsaken victims of slavery. She is symbolic of the slave trade itself, for though she came from Sethe's womb, Beloved is greater than just one person, she is indicative of a people, struggling to live their lives, forever haunted by the institution of slavery... A hot thing...

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