
Allegorical Potentials In Beloved

Discuss the elements which keep interpretative possibilities open in *Beloved*. How far are these resolved or not by the end of the narrative?

'...definitions belong to the definers not the defined.' (*Beloved*, p.190)

When Sixo provides an explanation for shooting shoat on Mr Garner's property, this is schoolteacher's immediate and uncompromising reaction to the slave's attempt at self-justification. In the eyes of the white man, the slaves ('the defined') are not entitled to the privilege of giving, or even creating, their own perspective on events. The phrasing of his opinion also suggests that there can only ever be one completely true version of everything: each event can ultimately be 'defined' in one indisputable and finite account (his). This in itself is only one perspective, however, a fact that Morrison's complicated narrative technique suggests subtly and yet unequivocally. Rebecca Ferguson observes that 'while the language of the dominant culture and the written word itself have all too often been potent instruments in the oppression [of black people], not to have mastery of them is to be rendered impotent in ways that matter greatly'. Morrison is very aware of this paradox which she herself faces as a black writer, and the force of language and communication is greatly emphasised in *Beloved*. The text vividly presents the huge extent of interpretative possibilities relating to issues such as motherhood, slavery and black history in particular, by employing a variety of narratives which focus on the same events. While Morrison thus proves gloriously that contrary to schoolteacher's stance, black people are many-dimensional humans with a full range of emotions and values, her most striking achievement is simultaneously to demonstrate the ways in which endless interpretation can become futile. Sethe's expression of maternal love in the killing of her child, for instance, is misinterpreted as a savage act by both black and white characters in the book, and also possibly by the reader: only she can explain it. This sense of struggling to reach the correct interpretation is also encountered by the reader on a different level, as he tries to grasp an understanding of the main events of Sethe's life from an often confused and chaotic narrative.

Morrison, who never contributes her own personal opinion or judgement directly to the text, depicts the horrors of slavery in a number of imaginative ways. She allows all her characters to give their own accounts of slavery, and it is the differing levels of eagerness with which they divulge their interpretations that are very telling. The white men of Sweet Home farm are always fervent in their desire to share their opinions of slavery, while the slaves themselves are reluctant to speak of it at all, even after their release or escape. The extent to which Mr Garner prides himself on his treatment of slaves is ludicrous; it becomes clear that he is more concerned with debating the issue than with the slaves's actual welfare. He believes himself to embody 'what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men' (p.11). While this may appear to be a more humanitarian outlook than

schoolteacher's listing of 'animal characteristics' in Sethe (p.193), the comparison becomes virtually irrelevant when the actual treatment of the slaves is considered. The following exchange between Baby Suggs and Mr Garner illuminates this discrepancy of standards:

"Ever go hungry [at Sweet Home]?"

"No, sir."

"Cold?"

"No, sir."

"Anybody lay a hand on you?"

"No, sir."

"Did I let Halle buy you or not?"

"Yes, sir, you did," she said, thinking, But you got my boy and I'm all broke down. You be renting him out to pay for me way after I'm gone to Glory. (p.146)

Mr Garner is overwhelmingly proud of his non-violence towards Baby, which he sees as an expression of his extreme kindness, rather than as a confirmation of her basic human rights. This passage strikingly conveys his failure to consider (or recognise) her shattered spirit, and the effect of the loss of her son, indicating that his perception of the slaves is barely distinguishable from schoolteacher's. 'Mr Garner acted like the world was a toy he was supposed to have fun with' (p.139), observes Sethe, and in this light, his supposedly benevolent stance on slavery can be seen as a self-indulgent attempt to make himself seem subversive.

Mr Garner's tiresome eagerness to create his own interpretation of slavery is rendered particularly insignificant by the reluctance experienced by Sethe to face her own past. Because she was so closely and chaotically immersed in the actual experience of slavery and escaping, she was never given the opportunity to reflect and shape her own interpretation of events and their consequences. For this reason she suffers from unwelcome 'rememories' which are terrifyingly tangible:

Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm every tree and glass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there you who never was there if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you...(p.36)

This 'picture' has been eternally lodged in Sethe's mind, and is so powerful that she is, seemingly irrationally (given that slavery has been abolished), afraid of Denver being absorbed into the image. Like the reader, Denver cannot fully appreciate the precise details of Sethe's past and the haunting effect they have on her mother, but she is aware of their weight and significance. 'Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself...the rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it' (p.63). Denver is jealous of this other world purely because her mother's accounts are accompanied with such overwhelming force, of which the young girl cannot understand the source.

This notion of sensing the significance of something which cannot be explained or accounted for with mere language is particularly relevant to *Beloved's* treatment of black suffering. Jan Furman refers to Morrison's 'titanic responsibility [in] continuing an unfinished script of slavery begun over two centuries ago by the first slave narrative', and interestingly, the author's most effective continuation of this 'script' is when she powerfully revokes the value of language in communicating the pain of slavery. Paul D's account of the silent fraternity between the blacks who drifted around uneasily after the Civil War is particularly moving:

Odd clusters and strays of Negroes...counted heavily on each other. Silent, except for social courtesies, when they met one another they neither described nor asked about the sorrow that drove them from one place to another. The whites didn't bear speaking on. Everybody knew. (p.52-3)

There is no room for interpretation, 'everybody knew' the gruesome truth and any attempts at verbal explanation or sympathy would be redundant. Morrison herself ascribes to this mute understanding, and so 'sorrow' is the only term she uses to describe their situation; its simplicity hinting at the presence of so much unutterable emotion. A similar sense of community is recognisable at the opening of Baby Suggs's sermons, when all the listeners are told to 'let loose' and 'laugh, cry and dance' (p.89) together. Her inspirational words have a place of their own, but this huge physical and communal release is striking in its sense of implied joint understanding. The individual perspective is irrelevant as everybody is succumbing to the same sense of temporary liberation (just as Paul D's friends have mutually encountered the same 'sorrow').

The character of *Beloved*, who can be said to represent in certain ways the 'Sixty Million and More' of the dedication, and who certainly has much to communicate, demonstrates most dramatically the shortcomings of language. 'how can I say things that are pictures' (p.210), she muses, and the reader experiences a similar frustration through endeavouring to make sense of her muddled narrative. Disturbing revelations such as 'the man on my face is dead his face is not mine ... someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in' (p.210) express confusion and panic, particularly regarding her sense of identity. The reader's attempt to reach a clear interpretation of her disjointed phrases will never be fully successful, but a sense of her bewilderment will be obtained through this very disjointedness. If her references to 'the sea which is the color of bread' and 'the crouching others' (p.211) are seen as representing the Middle Passage suffered by so many slaves, a parallel may be drawn between the reader's

failure to make sense of Beloved's narrative, and his failure as someone who has never undergone the experience to understand the effects of slavery. In both cases, regardless of the degree of interest or application, a precise interpretation will be impossible. The ambiguity surrounding the truth will only mean that endless impressions of it can be reached, however.

The most powerful demonstration of failed interpretation in the novel is Sethe's killing of her child, the focus of several narratives. In the same way that Paul D cannot quite appreciate the degree of Sethe's humiliation when her milk is taken ("they used cowhide on you?" "And they took my milk." "They beat you and you was pregnant?" "And they took my milk!" (p.17), only she can explain the logic of her apparently savage act. For once agreeing with the whites (a fact which can only magnify the sense of betrayal felt by Sethe), her family and friends label her an animal. The ordinarily gentle Paul D is shocked into announcing that 'You got two feet, Sethe, not four' (p.165); her former friend Ella proclaims that 'I ain't got no friends take a handsaw to their own children' (p.187); and most saddening of all, her daughter Denver lives in the silent fear that 'there sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own'(p.206). Propelled by a fear for her own safety (and later Beloved's), Denver misinterprets her mother's action as an indication of a frighteningly vague 'something in her' which cannot be controlled. Denver's long spell of temporary deafness, a subconscious decision to shield herself from Sethe's account, is evidence of the potency of her terror of the truth (as she sees it). Schoolteacher's gleeful assumption that it was 'all testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred' (p.151) takes on a particularly unpleasant resonance when contrasted with Denver's account, for she actually does suspect animalistic tendencies in Sethe. His appallingly smug stance (he doesn't even try to understand) and her childish dread (a desperate failure to understand) demonstrate the diverse nature and consequences of misinterpretation.

Sethe's own account, which appears almost incidentally in the text, explains her actions in a style which is absolutely distinct from the other renditions:

...And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected ever bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out away, over there where no one could hurt them.(p.163)

Her aesthetically allegorical description of this extremely instinctive, decisive and fluid behaviour is laden, to the cold observer, with seemingly vague and baffling references to 'the veil' and 'over there'. Just as it is difficult to comprehend Sethe's illogical fear of Denver reliving her experience of Sweet Home, the psychological reasoning which equates murdering her daughter with motherly love can only be understood by Sethe. Two things do become apparent when reading her account however: firstly, that her motive was indeed love; secondly, that any attempt to truly understand this is futile.

The interpretative possibilities open to the reader of *Beloved* are endless, mainly due to the existence of several different narratives. Linden Peach notes that 'the fragmentary nature of the

text means that even if readers succeed in putting together the events of Sethe's life since 1855, it will not allow them to achieve a grasp of the whole text'. His use of 'succeed' and 'allow' intriguingly insinuates that Morrison has created a complicated puzzle for her readers, who are challenged into reaching one correct solution. After several readings of *Beloved* it becomes apparent that this does not exist. Morrison never ceases to stress the importance of communication (celebrated in Denver's course of action at the end of the novel), revelling as an author in the diversity of her characters's viewpoints. The comparative merits of language and of a vaguer, more meaningful sense of understanding are sensitively explored, especially when dealing with slavery. Morrison's relationship with her reader is rather coy: while tempting him towards an all-encompassing understanding of the text, she very gradually reveals that no such thing exists. Instead Morrison proves that while striving for comprehension is an inevitable and necessary human trait, searching for the perfect interpretation is challenging, never-ending and almost always futile.

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