

Narcissistic self- defense in medea and beloved essay



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Toni Morrison's novels are, to a great extent, susceptible to an archetypal interpretation. Thus, *Beloved* has been considered, by the critical opinion, as having its roots in the myth of Medea which forms the subject of Euripides' ancient tragedy. The story told by Morrison's novel is the constructed mostly on what Kathleen Marks termed as the "apotropaic" strategies of imagination, that is as strategies that serve as a means of deflecting danger or threats with the aid of certain mirror gestures that somehow imitate the danger itself: "The apotropaic, then, are those gestures aimed at warding off, or resisting, a danger, a threat, or an imperative. More exactly, apotropaic gestures anticipate, mirror, and put into effect that which they seek to avoid: one does what one finds horrible so as to mitigate its horror.["

..]Sethe, seen as a Persephone type, enacts through a love gone awry a series of apotropaic gestures: she kills her baby daughter in order to prevent its being consumed by the oppressive forces of slavery; she uses her "rememory," as she calls her memory, as a strategy to in fact ward off memory, for "keeping the past at bay," as she says; she has sex with the headstone engraver in an act that sanctions her killing action, making tombs of her love, her womb, her home, and her life, and thereby doubling the harmful consequences of the original killing. In the context of the apotropaic, then, the ghostly figure *Beloved* is understood as a kind of Gorgon's head (a prime apotropaic image), as the product of Sethe's pushing-away and cutting-off actions, as the return of Sethe's refusal to remember who she is." (Marks, 2-3)All these apotropaic gestures are the tragic outcome of the poignant marks left by slavery and racial discrimination on identity and the relationship with one's own self.

Although in Euripides' play the reasons for the murdering of the children by their own mother seem different, there are many common points between Medea's and Sethe's act. Thus, we know that Medea's primary mobile for her crime is revenge. Abandoned by her husband Jason, who decides to remarry with the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth, Medea seeks revenge and devises a double murder to achieve her purposes: first, she pretends to accept her new situation and her impending exile from Corinth, and sends her two young sons, carrying presents on her behalf, for the bride of Jason. Thus she accomplishes her first murder, having first poisoned the presents she sent. Her second crime is even more atrocious- she kills her own sons, in a desperate gesture meant to cause utmost pain to Jason.

It can be said therefore that her prime motive for murdering her children is revenge. However, the gesture is more complex and resembles that of Sethe's. Medea does not only cause pain to Jason through her gesture, at the same time she causes pain to herself also, that is she, like Sethe, feels her identity, and her statute as a woman in society is threatened, and she reacts by murdering her children to defend herself and her social standing. Therefore she feels that Jason's act of remarriage has permanently injured her own family: Jason is the one who, in her view, first threatened the children through his betrayal, and therefore is more responsible than she is for the fate of the children:" Medea. My boys, how sick your father's baseness which destroyed you! Jason.

But it was not my right hand that killed them. Medea. No-it was your insulting arrogance and your new marriage. Jason.

Did you really think my marriage a good enough reason to kill them? Medea. Do you think that this is a small hurt for a woman? Jason. Not a woman who knows self-control. But to you it is all the evil in the world.” (Euripides, 37)Medea’s accusations to Jason make it obvious that her act of murder signifies more than revenge: she that it is the only way to atone for Jason’s act and, at the same time, an act which wards of the shame she feels at having been deprived of her rights as a wife and mother, at the same time, because the two qualities – that of the wife and that of the mother are inseparable in her mind. This is obvious in the monologue she gives forth when trying to mitigate the pangs of conscience caused by the coming murder , as she planned it:“ But what is wrong with me? Do I want to make myself ridiculous by letting my enemies go unpunished? I must face the deed.

Shame on my cowardice in even letting my mind dally with these weak thoughts. Go into the house, children. Those for whom it is not right to be present at my sacrifice-that is a matter for them. My hand will not weaken. Ah, Ah, do not, my heart, do not do this.

Let them be, poor heart-spare the children. Alive with us in Athens, they will make you happy. By the avenging fiends below in Hades, it will never come to pass that I leave my children for my enemies to insult. There’s no alternative-they must die.

And since they must, I who gave them birth shall kill them.” (Euripides, 29)Thus, both Medea’ s and Sethe’s acts – the murdering of their children, although springing from contextually different reasons, can be explained at a

different level, as a gesture that is the result of an external, social threat on their own selves. In the case of Medea, the threat is Jason's remarriage which humiliates her as a woman, and also impairs her social status through the impending exile. For Sethe, the social threat is that of slavery and through the murder of her baby -daughter she is trying to oppose this external will that acts on her own self and on her identity.

These external threats create a psychological state of mind in the mothers which urges them to an extreme act of self-defense: they murder their own children. Their act is not easy to define in psychological terms, because of its complexity and extreme nature. One can, however envisage the fact that both Medea and Sethe have been in a way, denied identity by the social world they live in, either by slavery or exile, and this naturally affects the way they relate to their own selves, and to their motherhood, which is one of the most important aspects of their condition as women. Still, this fact does not imply that maternal love does not exist. In both Medea's lamentations and monologues and in Sethe's haunted "rememory" of her act, we have proof that the maternal feeling was very strong. In fact, in Sethe's case this maternal love is the reason for the baby's name - Beloved, the name being a simple paraphrase of a mother's love for her child.

And, moreover, Sethe's living child, Denver, suggests, that the mother is caught up in the spell of this love for her dead child: " ' For a baby she throws a powerful spell,' said Denver. ' No more powerful than the way I loved her,' Sethe answered and there it was again. The welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones; the one she selected to lean against on tiptoe, her knees wide

open as any grave. Pink as a fingernail it was, and sprinkled with glittering chips.

Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes I'll do it for free." (Morrison, 5) Sethe's love for her child, which works as a spell is acknowledged by her act of prostitution which she made use of to get the name Beloved engraved on the stone of the baby's tomb. This maternal love is, paradoxically the main spring of the crime, both in Medea and in Morrison's Beloved, since the outside social threats have psychologically altered this feeling by turning it into one of possessiveness. Thus, in both narratives maternal love becomes emphasized in its instinctual, possessive nature, as Laura Vickroy observes in her study on Morrison's prose: " Morrison's work illustrates what John Brenkman refers to as social mediation of the ego (169), where subjectivity and human interactions become reified and distorted within social systems. The once-protective love of mothers like Eva Peace in Sula and Sethe in Beloved becomes desperate and possessive in a hostile environment.

As mediators between their children and the world, these mothers experience what Marianne Hirsch describes as a ' double identity' or ' self-division,' wherein their ambivalent relationship to the world affects their motherly roles. " (Iyasere, 297) Medea and Sethe are as mothers , as Laura Vickroy observes, the " mediators between their children and the world", and this is why they kill their children when the relation established between themselves and the world is impaired. The pressure from the outside affects their general view of the world and this is how their murders occur : they feel compelled to react in defense of themselves, first, but their act of defense extends to their children as well, because of the mother-child union, which in <https://assignbuster.com/narcissistic-self-defense-in-medea-and-beloved-essay/>

this case becomes enhanced. Mother and child become a unity because of the social threat, and because of the need of the mothers to assert their identity of which the children are an integral part. In both Medea's and Sethe's case, the children are very young, and therefore still dependable on their mothers, and still a part of them, rather than independent individuals. This is what makes possible the two murders.

As critics have observed for Morrison's novel, and as it is also true for Medea, the psychological interpretation here can be that of a narcissistic tendency of the self threatened by society, who has no other way out than to react possessively against those forces that deny its grounds of identity: "This yearning is poignantly captured in the image of two turtles mating. Denver and Beloved observe the turtles on the bank of the river: 'The embracing necks — hers stretching up toward his bending down, the pat pat pat of their touching heads. No height was beyond her yearning neck, stretched like a finger toward his, risking everything outside the bowl just to touch his face. The gravity of their shields, clashing, countered and mocked the floating heads touching' (105). The yearning of Beloved, Sethe, and Denver to touch faces with the beloved other, to know and be known, is, like that of the turtles, obstructed and mocked by the shields or shells each has constructed.

The shell, however, is a necessary defense; it attempts to preserve the self from a culture that seeks to deny it, As Joseph Wessling argues[...] , narcissistic defenses, such as 'self-division' and an inability to empathize or experience human sympathy, may be 'the price of survival' (286) in an oppressive, unjust society.

” (Iyasere, 162)Medea and Sethe are therefore performers of apotropaic gestures, since their crimes are a reaction against the threat of society and since this reaction does not consist of mere self-defense, but of a horrifying act that intends to somehow balance the horror of the incoming danger: slavery for Sethe ‘ s Beloved, and a dismembered family and social shame for Medea’s children. The murders are both in defense of the children and both in self-defense, since the mothers become possessive under the threat and take revenge on society by performing a terrible crime which will be sufficiently assertive of their identity and which will threaten in its turn social peace. Their aggressiveness is, in psychological terms, the best token of their feeling of threat from the outside. Therefore, both Medea and Beloved, display the same narcissistic frustration caused by a cruel society which manages to baffle one’s sense of identity , and which determines them to react violently and possessively against its injustice, be it against exile, as in Medea’s case or slavery, as in Sethe’s. The murdering of the child is explained through this social context in which the self is threatened, in both Medea and Beloved, as a violent act of self-defense or defense of one’s identity, which extends to the children as well because of an enhanced possessiveness on the side of the mothers.;