

# The loss and rebirth of motherhood essay sample

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### —The Interpretation of Sethe's Motherhood in *Beloved* (Toni Morrison)

*Beloved*, written by Toni Morrison, plays an important role in the history of American literature. This book discusses the main character Sethe, who does an understandable action but makes people hard to accept it in that social community. She loses motherhood and herself; however, under the help from black compatriots, she gets out from the haze in her heart, regains her life and finds the regressed motherhood finally. The story happens during 1873, after the American Civil War. Through *Beloved*, Toni Morrison shows the situation of black community in America under the later slavery and the period during the reconstruction of United States in the nineteenth century. Morrison got the ideas of *Beloved* when she saw a terrifying report from history resources: On January 1856, Margaret Garner, a black female slave escapes with her daughter (Mervyn Rothstein); and “ when the marshals found Margaret in a back room, she had slit her two year old daughter's throat with a butcher knife, killing her” (Casey Nichols). Morrison makes Margaret reborn as Sethe in *Beloved*.

Sethe kills her daughter like Margaret did in the real life; however, not only strong love makes her do the crazy action, but also the horrible memories, religion traditions and lacking of family love take effect on her. Sethe, as a slave, can love her children only, so she would do everything to protect them; indeed, she kills her little daughter with butcher knife when the marshals come to get her. After Sethe escapes from the life of slavery, she finally knows the feeling of freedom. She indicates “ all I'm saying is that's a selfish pleasure I never had before” (Morrison 192) when she wants to make a beautiful flower with fabric to give to her daughter. Obviously, raising her

child satisfied her selfish motherhood because she finally can have someone that really belongs to her, loves her and depends on her. At the time she plays a role of a slave, she has four babies with Halle, her husband, but she cannot love any of those babies because she may have to separate with them. Now she can love, she does not need to send her babies away, so the motherhood which hides in her heart for many years, finally releases.

Like the volcanic explosion, the strong love to her babies running out from Sethe's heart, shows in her action of killing her little daughter in order to keep her baby with her. James Phelan, the author of *Sethe's Choice: Beloved and The Ethics of Reading*, looks at the ethics and value in *Beloved* from the slave life of black women. She believes " Sethe's version is obviously a strong counter to the earlier two: her purpose was not to kill but to protect, her motivation was love, and the action was a success. She does act instinctively, but the instincts are those of motherlove" (James Phelan). Phelan believes Sethe's instinctive action makes her kill her baby for protecting. I agree with Phelan. For instance, Sethe has experienced escaping and she must remember her strong fear of being caught during these days in the rest of her life. When the marshals come to catch her, the horrible memory and fear full in her head. Following the progress of the story, Sethe must have a complex emotion in a similar situation to her escaping experience.

She gets pregnant when she escapes; now she has four children to take care. Sethe doesn't know what to do, so killing her child is her instinctive reaction. Paul D indicates that Sethe's " love is so thick" (Morrison 193).

Sethe feels proud of being a mother and she won't let anyone take her child. Sethe believes " I stopped him," and " I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison 193). As a result, the horrible memories influence Sethe's life that leads her to do a cruel killing action. Nevertheless, not only the strong love pushes Sethe to kill her daughter, but also the traditional culture of Africa influenced her. Although Sethe lives in the slavery period in America, her spiritual world still belongs to her hometown-Africa. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), author W. E. B. Du Bois points out " three things characterized this religion of the slave, the preacher, the music, and the frenzy."

Baby Suggs plays a role of " an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it" (Morrison 102). Sethe cannot forget the day she sees " Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the wood" (Morrison 102), encouraging blacks to live on and love themselves, she makes a speech as a preacher; not only because she misses Baby Suggs, but also the speech encouraged herself, too. As for music, Sethe notices Beloved " humming" (Morrison 107) the song she sings to her child only. Making freestyle songs makes up the essence of African music. Although Sethe already forgets the African spoken language, she still knows about African music. African people have the most Frenzy souls because they live as part of the nature. They use to express their intense emotion of their religion through raging action. For example, they dance the antelope during traditional ceremonies, " the men

as well as the ma'ams, one of whom was certainly her own" (Morrison 37), the same as Sethe remembered when she plays a role of a slave.

Or like the " wild African Savage shook his bars and said wa wa" (Morrison 58) that Sethe has seen at the carnival of blacks with Denver and Paul D. Sethe receives less education and influences from the African culture, which seems crazy and unusual with the common culture we know, leading her to do the insane action. Also, lacking love makes her lost her motherhood. On one hand, Sethe lacks of family love. For all the African-American slaves, freedom and having a family turn into their dreams. Sethe has mentioned about her mother in *Beloved*: " I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields" (Morrison 72) and Sethe thinks her mother " must of nursed me two or three weeks" (Morrison 72). She indicates that " I was sucked from another woman whose job it was" (Morrison 72) and her mother do nothing for her. She says " she didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember" (Morrison 72). Sethe's mother played the role of a slave too and died at Sethe's young age. And she gets neither love nor background of her family from her mother.

Knowing nothing but the life of an orphan, slavery turns into her only density. On the other hand, Sethe lacks love from the people who live in the same society. Sethe doesn't have friends at all. In the nineteenth century, slaves never have rights of anything but silence. Their despair of life makes them lonely and unwilling to talk, to make friends and to love. Sethe feels very lonely; and no one can listen to her demands. Because of lacking love, her motherhood changes to highly protected and distorted. She would not let

anyone take her family away, so she chooses to kill her babies. Sethe loses her motherhood because of her strong love, the horrible memories, the effect from African culture and the lack of love; however, her motherhood returns with the comfort from Baby Suggs, her dead daughter's forgiveness, and understanding from all the black women in the town. Baby Suggs, the mother of Sethe's husband, helps Sethe walk out from the shadow and finds her motherhood comes back. After Sethe escaped, Baby Suggs gives her a house called "the Sweet Home" to live in, and takes care of Sethe and her babies. That time turns into the first time for Sethe to say she has a home with confidence. Sethe cannot forget the day she killed her daughter.

She feels very guilty, shame, intranquil and sad about what she did to her poor baby. Everyone in the town sees what she does on the newspaper and nobody understands her but Baby Suggs. She encourages Sethe to look forward, forgive herself and move on with her life. Without the comfort from Baby Suggs, Sethe may turn into crazy because of the others' discrimination. Moreover, Sethe believes "she come back to me of her own free will and I don't need to explain a thing...when I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already" (Morrison 236). Her dead daughter comes back to her as a ghost possess on a girl. Sethe notices that her daughter doesn't act mad of what she did to her, so she gets comfort from it. In addition, Denver goes to gets help from other black women for sick Sethe and tells them Sethe's story. Her action let all the black women in the town understand and forgive Sethe about killing her daughter for protecting. Hearing others' care and understanding, Sethe gets better from her illness and forgives herself. Guilty, shame, intranquil and sad, all goes away

following the time she lives under a normal life and finally achieves the rebirth of her motherhood.

#### Works cited

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