Good example of motifs of desire in toni morrisons beloved essay

Life, Home

The realities of slavery run throughout Toni Morrison’s Beloved. Two aspects of those realities are particularly striking. First, the related notions of “ home” and “ community,” words which Nancy Jesser points out are “ frequently uttered with reverence” (Jesser 1999), were outside of the control of slaves, a fact that no one knew better than the slaves themselves. A further reality of slavery driving the narrative within Beloved concerns the human impulse to protect those one loves, an impulse that leads to so many of the episodes of conflict throughout the novel. These two varieties of desire provide extraordinary insights into human nature, and particularly into the experiences of enslaved African Americans. Finally, the shared human desire for love—in the individual, personal sense, as well as in the broader, more abstract and communal sense—drives the action of the main characters while it also gives form to the theme of the novel.

Nancy Jesser offers an extremely detailed examination of the various physical settings presented within the novel. It is enough to say here that the various locations carry strong messages of what home is—and is not. For Sethe, the “ home” she escapes with her children, Sweet Home, certainly is not her home in the way that a free person would define it. However, even though she escapes Sweet Home, she cannot psychically escape from it; it is where Sethe and her children “ belong” (Morrison p. 9) and it “ belongs to” them as well (Morrison p. 11). Jesser echoes Sethe’s comment that Sweet Home is a place that “ comes back whether [she] wants it to or not” (Jesser 1999). Why wouldn’t Sethe—or any slave—want to leave the escaped “ home” far behind, both in distance and memory? Simply put, the desire to have a “ home,” even one like Sweet Home, filled a critical need within the

slaves' world.

Lynda Koolish offers an even broader reading of this notion of " home" and a result of the slaves' uncertain experience of it. In her reading of the novel, Koolish refers to the not-uncommon experience of psychological upheaval that masters often inflicted upon slaves, pointing out, " The story not to be passed on, the story not told in traditional slave narratives, is that of psychosis, dissociation, of climbing out of one's body ' to forget that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind'" (Koolish 2001). When considering this stripping of not just the physical home, family, and community from a slave, but broadening the frame to also think about the psychological implications of the loss of this identifying personal and social framework from the individual, one can only imagine the depth of the horror resulting from such an act. While it is true that some individuals, both in real life and in Morrison's novel, would pass into this stage of psychosis and dissociation to forget, it is very clear that many either did not experience this, or did so, then recovered, and experienced the nearly unimaginable levels of desire to restore the psychologically crucial family, home, and community relationships that had been stolen away.

Dana Heller points out that the desire to experience these connections is not merely a simple sentimental longing for the familiar structures that have been stripped away. Rather, this desire is a matter of extreme, all-consuming importance. As she puts it, "[Beloved] is a novel centrally concerned with the need to rediscover or literally re-member the fractured stories of the past so that these stories might preserve lost culture and restore the familial and community bonds, which, although severely weakened by generations of

enslavement, still function reciprocally to construct identity” (Heller 1994). In other words, this desire is not a wishful kind of yearning—it is a nearly physical hunger that must be satisfied in order for the individual to understand his or her place within the universe. This is a critical understanding: because the connection of the individual to and within a family and home structure is so central to his or her identity, there is a concurrent bond to the members of that family and home that, in its purest form, will lead the individual to make any sacrifices necessary to preserve the family and home, at least to the greatest extent possible in a given situation.

Those sacrifices became exceptionally personal and real for many slaves, especially the women. Heller points out that this sacrifice in Beloved takes the form of “ a brutal act of infanticide”: when Sethe’s children are in danger with the approach of the cruel Schoolteacher, “ in a desperate effort to protect them--to put them all someplace where they'd be safe--she attempts to kill them” (Heller 1994). This horrific act seems completely counterintuitive: how can killing her children protect them? And how would Sethe be able to live with herself afterward? However, when one considers the larger horrors that may well have awaited her and her children, had Schoolteacher captured them and returned them to Sweet Home, Sethe’s consuming desire to spare her children from that fate becomes more understandable. But the outcome of that episode—the death of her daughter Beloved—triggers another level of desire within Sethe that continues throughout the novel.

Teresa N. Washington has proposed that a very specific characteristic

underlies the dynamic between Sethe and Beloved. Washington writes, “ Ajé is a Yoruba word and concept that describes a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in Africana women . . . honored as ‘ our mothers’ . . . recognized as the owners and controllers of everything on Earth” (Washington 2005). Surely Sethe, who would have been exposed to many of the tales and folklore of her African ancestors, would have also been familiar with this concept of Ajé. Interestingly, while stories of Ajé mothers killing their daughters are common, Washington argues that the typical reading of such acts is too simplistic. Instead, she says, “ Morrison's work forces us to re-evaluate” this reading, not as “ women who are destroying their progeny. To quote Sethe, they are putting them ‘ where they'd be safe’” (Washington, 2005).

In essence, Washington argues, this Ajé aspect of Sethe explains and necessitates her act, not as a horrible crime against her young daughter, but rather as her fierce desire that Beloved be safe from the terrors of capture and, by extension from the horrors of life as a slave. And while Sethe physically kills her daughter, how many slave mothers did so in an emotional sense by distancing themselves from indulging in any hopes for their children? Indeed, Morrison writes that even Baby Suggs did so: “ The last of her children . . . 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. Seven times she had done that” (Morrison p. 139). Everything within the maternal instinct is geared toward a sense of the future, of raising an infant through a safe and happy childhood to become a self-sufficient, productive, contented adulthood. White mothers, or modern-

day mothers, might take this instinct and desire for granted, but a slave mother could never do so.

In addition to the desires already discussed, another type of desire informs the novel Beloved, what might be termed “ agape” love, an unconditional, selfless love. In some sense, this agape love is present to some degree in the first two desires that have been examined, but those desires contain elements of self-interest and identity as well. Perhaps the clearest practitioner of this final sort of desire is the character Amy Denver. The white indentured servant girl has many similarities to Sethe: like Sethe, Amy is uneducated, abused, and starving (both physically and emotionally) when the two meet. Like Sethe, Amy has been schooled by the hardships she has known in her young life. As Nicole M. Coonradt explains, “ Although an orphaned bastard, ‘ enslaved,’ and denied so much, Amy . . . still understands how to treat another human being with compassion. Her all too human desire to love and be loved supersedes both her concern for safety and her desire for freedom” (Coonradt 2005).

In addition, Amy overlooks the most obvious barrier between her and Sethe, their respective races. It is worth noting as well that Amy’s treatment—though she was white—was not far from that endured by the black slaves. Nor should it be overlooked that for her part, Sethe was also transgressing racial boundaries that should have raised danger signals. Coonradt is correct when she writes that these young women’s “ similarities account for ‘ how recklessly [Sethe] behaved with this whitegirl—a recklessness born of desperation and encouraged by Amy's [tenderness],’” and a recklessness that traces directly to each woman’s aching desire for love expressed via

uncritical human contact (Coonradt 2005). Amy’s desire for a human connection, both as a potential source of love and also as an outlet for her desire to extend love, essentially makes her colorblind, because her desire outweighs the strictures of propriety. For Sethe’s part, this colorblindness must express a particularly deep level of desire, both because of the dangers of a black woman, and a slave, presuming to associate with a white woman, and also because of her own personal traumatic experiences at the hand of the white slaveholding society.

Toni Morrison’s Beloved is a classic work of modern American literature. At once a ghost story, a quasi-documentary, and a fact-based account of man’s inhumanity to his fellow man, the novel presents an examination of the meaning of desire and its effects on the actions and attitudes of the various characters. Make no mistake: Beloved relates depictions of some of the most gruesome and brutal acts perpetrated under the aegis of “ the peculiar institution” of American slavery, and the darkness and despair of those depictions is nearly overwhelming at times. However, as Nicole M. Coonradt so beautifully concludes her study of the novel, “ Morrison reveals the power of love to conquer loneliness and heal slavery's shattered souls. Her final word bridges all: ‘ Beloved.’ Be loved ” (Coonradt 2005). In doing so, Morrison offers an insight that gives modern readers not only a new way to understand the horrors of American slavery and the incredible resilience of those who endured it, but perhaps also keys to interpret and act on daunting challenges within their own lives.

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