

Beloved: modern african american storytelling essay samples

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In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* the use of the phrase "This is not a story to pass on" in three different iterations is confusing, because if history and literature has emphasized anything it is "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Morrison is making sure the story is literally passed but the real meaning is deliberately ambiguous, having different meanings depending on how you read or analyze the novel. It could mean "this is an important story, do not pass on it"; or miss the experience of knowing it. It could also be saying that slavery was a story, a bad story, and it should not - as an institution or worldview - be repeated and passed on to future generations. However, the line strongly suggests that Morrison was talking about the process of learning about history and reading language privately, and not the more traditional form of oral storytelling. Instead of passing it on, like an old folktale, this story is private and may not be for telling. It is a different kind of story.

Traditional oral storytelling was used by slaves to maintain their history, reinforce shared identity, diffuse cultural norms, and entertain children (Wilson). They were often allegories with cute animals involved, and taught morality, and was an important African custom that was passed to America through slavery. These stories were all about "retelling" and would change and evolve over time. The stories were often morality tales about persevering through adversity. Briar Rabbit and Little John fables, portrayed the clever and resourceful underdog (slaves) as triumphing over the more powerful adversary (slave-owners/society). Traditional slave storytelling were positive communal stories. (Wilson).

Beloved is not one of those stories. It is a dark book examining the

psychological repression of trauma and painful memories of slavery. It is a more postmodern tale, told from a number of different perspectives. There is an ambiguous ghost, babies dying, and people drinking and fighting. To be understood, it must be read, analyzed and absorbed, but not passed on, because everyone needs to experience it themselves. This process is similar to the ways characters experienced Beloved. Both the story and Beloved are catalysts that spark change, a way to confront the past and come out a different person. Morrison's Beloved is not "a story to pass on" because it is a personal and individual psychological reading experience, not the kind of story you tell around the campfire or to children as they go to sleep.

More specifically, this is a ghost story. Beloved is a ghost of the past, and represents the darkness of the past and slavery itself. Her actual identity is unclear because she represents different things to different characters. She could be a sex slave, a normal woman or a ghost mother baby. But to everyone, she represents the darkness of slavery, or history, coming back to life to retraumatize the characters. Beloved reminds people of painful experiences they thought they had put behind them. Much of the novel is about facing demons, looking for closure, and processing the feelings and emotions associated with a dark historical time period. The characters have different methods of coping with the past. Denver did not even know his grandmother was hanged, until Beloved got her mother to open up. Sethe just wants to forget everything, and Paul D just will not talk about it.

Neither strategy is working when Beloved arrives. In this way, as some sort of paranormal therapist, Beloved plays both a positive and negative role in the characters lives. She forces all the characters to examine their lives,

their pasts and repressed emotions.

However, enough history is enough. Her presence, which grows increasingly heavy and ominous, begins to hurt everyone psychologically. Processing repressed emotions to move on in life is good; dwelling on the past can be a psychological burden. By constantly living in the horrors of the past, the characters are being victimized a second time. As Amy says to Sethe, "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison 65). When Beloved leaves, there is a sigh of relief from the entire community:

“ They quickly and deliberately forget her. It took longer

for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forget her too.

Remembering seems unwise. . . .(Morrison 312).

This reflects the acknowledgment that after having dealt with demons, there is a time for

them to go, an individual and communal cleansing has taken place, but this stuff is too

dark to wrestle with on a daily basis.

Beloved is a very modern novel but the end reverts to traditional oral storytelling. The words slow down and become more introspective. This is a wrap up, a warning, the “ moral of the story.” The narration becomes introspective and poignant, the phrases become more poetic with repeated

rhyming phrases. Morrison starts with “ It was not a story to pass on”, meaning this individual story or situation was not something worth repeating over and over. This becomes a real motherly warning: “ This is not a story to pass on.” The entire novel, all the stories, is something that needs to be understood, and used, and then like Beloved, you need to move on and let others experience the story so they can get what they need out of it.

All the characters are better off for having known and experienced Beloved, but they again want to forget. As history, memories, and shared experiences, Beloved is never really gone. But she does not need to be a part of everyday life; it is just too painful. Once everyone came to terms with the past, they did not need her anymore.

There is a time to move on, and maybe even forgive. However, Morrison is not saying to forget the facts of slavery, or the evil that it represented. In fact she is challenging reader, of all colors, to look at slavery under a very harsh microscope. She realizes it is draining, and does not recommend obsessing over the evil, because that would be giving it a power and life it does not deserve.

Humanity and Spirituality: Resisting Dehumanization in African American Literature

Humanity refers to all human beings collectively, but the word is loaded with meaning. When someone no longer has feelings or is evil, they are said to have “ lost their humanity.” When you treat people or animals humanely, it means you recognize that everyone is part of the human race; and are kind and considerate for others. In short, humanity is the collective and individual “ goodness” of people. The ideology behind slavery is that slaves are not

human. This way of thinking does not accept that we are all equal humans, and in order for this to be true, slave-owners needed to take away the humanity of slaves. Otherwise, they had enslaved humans, which would be hard to negotiate morally. For example, part of what makes men human is their masculinity, their role and identity as men. If you can remove that from a male slave, you can reduce them to something less than human. Likewise, slave women would have their babies taken away from them, or were sexually abused, in order to break them down into something less than human. African-American literature that focuses on slavery often examines the ways slaves stayed human in a cruel and sadistic environment that only wanted to reduce them to inhuman machines.

One of the ways slaves could cling to their humanity was spirituality, the belief in a higher power and more equitable and sweet afterlife. Like art, music, literature, marriage, history, sex or language, spirituality is a part of what makes us human. It is the higher thinking, the idealization, the connection to something larger that creates a real person. Spirituality is the opposite of the base physical aspects and harsh reality of life; it is what makes a person feel whole and connected to the universe and the rest of humanity.

In African-American literature, you read a great deal about the gross dehumanization of blacks during slavery. Many of the stories are about the resourcefulness of slaves when it comes to preserving their humanity and spirituality. Slave-owners tried hard to remove or deny from their slaves the qualities that make people human. Slaves were not allowed to read, their children were often taken away, their individuality was squashed, histories

and religions were censured and erased. There is a recurring theme in literature that explores slavery of reducing humans to animals or machines, encouraged and capable only of working and surviving. The slave-owners are portrayed as cruel and inhumane people who believe that by debasing, alienating and torturing people, they can create better, more subservient and docile workers. There is often serious irony here, because the slave-owners are the ones who have lost their humanity.

W. E. B. Dubois thought the dehumanization of slavery was a tragedy, for the victims and perpetrators, because humans have problems understanding other humans on some fundamental level:

“ Herein lies the tragedy of the age: not that men are poor, — all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked, — who is good? not that men are ignorant, — what is Truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men.” (DuBois 41)

In his book of essays, *Souls of Black Folk*, Dubois also looked at they way slaves maintained their humanity with “ sorrow songs” which were used by slaves to “ tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longings towards a truer world” (Dubois 18). Dubois explained the ways black culture used music and spirituals for both survival and as a form of hidden protest against a tyrannical system.

Toni Morrison also shows the ways slaves had to reform their identity and psychologically deal with the wounds left from slavery in *Beloved*. At the root of the story is a mother who killed her own infant rather than let it live in the

world of slavery.

Octavia Butler explores this theme in her sci-fi short story "Bloodchild". In the story, humans (Terran) are reduced to birthing vessels, forced to carry an alien species eggs. Like slaves, the Terrans are in an alien land and have only one function, to give birth to Tlic. However, the humans are treated as "necessities, status symbols, and an independent people." They are dehumanized, because they have become technology to be used by the Tlic. Butler has taken this theme to another planet, and softened the edges of slavery, choosing to focus on reversing sex roles and investigating the act of childbirth and the oppressiveness of patriarchy. T'Gatoi describes her human hosts home as a "place of refuge" (Butler 18). However there are signs that humans are second class citizens. Lien is described as "unwillingly obedient" (Butler 4). Gan's mother literally sells him to T'Gatoi as a surrogate. There is a strong dystopian elements in Bloodchild that suggest a kind of modern slavery, that is less brutal, but more ominous - a strong human enslavement theme explored in The Matrix Trilogy.

"Bloodchild" also examines the idea of "manhood" which is so important in African-American literature on slavery. Depriving a man of masculinity was a way slave-owners dehumanizing them. Likewise, one way of limiting the totality and equality of women is to reduce them to only role - having babies. In "Bloodchild" the men are reduced to this role and for Gan, it is dangerous and does not feel good, both physically and psychologically. Part of being human is being a complete person, and not limited or reduced to one role, be it mother, worker, slave or piece of technology.

Ultimately, freedom involves having control of your own body, destiny and

identity. Freedom can be manifested in a number of ways and has sex gender related elements. Taking away a mans masculinity, or ability to have a wife or family, or to take away a women's child, or to sexually abuse people are all ways to dehumanize them. To reduce them to less than what they are - by forcing them to perform a purely productive role without any free will is the nature of slavery and inequality. African-American literature is - like the character Beloved - often used as a catalyst for psychological catharsis, and, as literature, a way for people to recognize and embrace their own humanity.

Works Cited

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