

Naming, self-ownership and identity in beloved

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The main characters in Toni Morrison's "Beloved" are former slaves; their main struggle, after having been stripped of their humanity and identity by the white men who owned them, is to reclaim self-ownership and form identities independent of those forced upon them by their owners under the system of slavery. Morrison uses the themes of naming and renaming to demonstrate the power of defining that slavery allows whites to hold over blacks, to assert that slavery as an institution rather than individual slave owners are responsible for crushing the identities of those who suffered under it, and to illustrate the struggle for blacks to stake out an independent identity after slavery. The institution of slavery grants Mr. and Mrs. Garner, the owners of Sweet Home, the power to name their slaves. Although Morrison portrays the Garners as generally benign in comparison to other slave owners, their demeanor is largely irrelevant; it is not slave owners as individuals, but slavery as a system that oppresses and exploits the main characters, undermining their ability to form identities of their own.

Whatever the Garners' intentions, their position over the slaves means that Paul D and his brothers inevitably lack self-ownership. The names Paul D, Paul A, and Paul F – as well as the common surname Garner – are a constant reminder to each of these characters that they exist as property rather than as men. For years Paul D believed that schoolteacher turned the people Garner had raised into men back into children. And it was that that made them run off. Now, plagued by the contents of his tobacco tin, he wondered how much of a difference there really was before schoolteacher and after. Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?

Questioning here whether or not he was ever truly a man under Garner, Paul D brings out a point that had been masked by the obvious differences between the two owners: slavery under any owner has the same psychological effects on the slave, and always renders the slave unable to become an independent identity. Mr. Garner's attempt to raise his slaves as "men" by allowing them more responsibility and outward respect than most slave owners is inherently futile because, as Paul D now realizes, the "manhood" or "personhood" of the slaves under these circumstances is not self-determined, but granted to them by their owner: "Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will?" (220). As long as they are slaves, Paul D and the other Sweet Home men will never be able to define themselves independently, and their manhood will always exist at the whim of the white man who owns them. After Mr. Garner's death, this underlying characteristic of slavery becomes apparent when schoolteacher demonstrates his unconditional power to deprive the slaves of their manhood or humanity. Paul D's sense of his own independent manhood under Garner was an illusion: whether or not he used it, Garner had the power to deprive Paul D of his manhood. The former slave Joshua, after gaining his freedom, establishes a new identity by renaming himself Stamp Paid. Paul D, in contrast, fails to consider giving himself a new name once he escapes Sweet Home. Psychologically, part of him still seems to be under the control of the system of slavery: even after years of "freedom", he continues to recognize as legitimate the dehumanizing name given to him by slavery. Like she does with many of the other characters and general themes in the novel, Morrison uses Paul D's struggle for independence to illustrate a

larger historical issue - one that carries over to present-day American society. Paul D's inability to break free from white oppression after slavery demonstrates to the reader the struggle that blacks faced after slavery. Howard Zinn, in his *People's History of the United States*, quotes ex-slave Thomas Hall's testimony to the Federal Writers' Project: Lincoln got the praise for freeing us, but did he do it? He gave us freedom without giving us any chance to live to ourselves and we still had to depend on the southern white man for work, food, and clothing, and he held us out of necessity and want in a state of servitude but little better than slavery. Like Thomas Hall, Paul D still remains dependent on the "southern white man"; since he still retains the identity forced upon him by his former owners, he is not completely free from the bonds of slavery. Another connection between the fictional character Paul D and the subject of history Thomas Hall can be found in the role white men play in their incomplete "freedom" - in Hall's case, physical and economic freedom; in Paul D's, psychological. Hall criticizes Lincoln for freeing the slaves legally but leaving them dependent on southern whites, forcing them into a sort of unofficial serfdom that for many blacks was effectively much the same as slavery. On one level, Morrison's use of Mr. Garner can be viewed as a critique of the U. S. government's treatment of slaves after the Civil War, and of the notion that Lincoln should be given full credit for "freeing" blacks in the South. As Lincoln "freed" the slaves legally while allowing them to remain under the control of whites, Garner granted Paul D his "manhood" - what Paul D, at the time, believed to be his psychological freedom - while actually retaining control over his very humanity and ultimately preventing him from forming a

self-determined identity. This dynamic carries over in many ways to today's American society, where blacks remain economically and socially oppressed by whites. By showing Paul D's inability to define himself independently as a detriment to his character, and only allowing Paul D to come to terms with himself after engaging in sexual intercourse with Beloved (which, on the figurative level, is to be understood as an act of embracing his past), Morrison reminds contemporary readers of the similar struggle that black Americans face today in a society where whites control the definitions and establish the norms. As Allan Johnson describes it: On most college campuses, for example, black students feel pressured to talk, dress, and act like middle-class whites in order to fit in and be accepted, what some have called being " Afro-Saxon." In similar ways, most workplaces define appropriate appearance and ways of speaking in terms that are culturally associated with being white... Racial and ethnic minorities experience being marked as outsiders, to the extent that many navigate the social world by consciously changing how they talk from one situation to another. In shopping for an apartment over the telephone, for example, many African Americans know they have to " talk white" in order to be accepted. Clearly, Morrison believes as Johnson does that the power of whites to define - and the willingness of many blacks to conform to whites' definitions and norms - is a vitally important cornerstone holding together today's system of black oppression. Paul D's inner conflict regarding his identity and self-ownership suggests a collective struggle among black Americans to establish an independent identity after slavery, which Morrison sees as a precursor to true and complete freedom from slavery and whites, and one that has yet to

be fully realized - " Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another." Baby Suggs's methods of claiming self-ownership stand in direct contrast with Paul D's denial and avoidance of deep emotion. Sethe's mother-in-law is known by two names: Baby Suggs and Jenny Whitlow. Legally, Jenny Whitlow is her " real" name: it is the name listed on her bill-of-sale, and the one used by her owners. To her, however, this name holds no real meaning. She identifies herself as Baby Suggs, the name given to her by her first husband and used by those closest to her. When she is freed, Baby Suggs is faced with a choice between these two names, each of them legitimate from opposite perspectives: Jenny Whitlow is a label given by an owner to a piece of property, and therefore the slave owner Mr. Garner considers it legitimate; Baby Suggs is a name given by a loving husband to his wife, and accordingly Baby Suggs herself finds greater personal value in it. By keeping this name, Baby Suggs claims self-ownership and takes a vital step toward forging an identity independent of slavery. Her renaming - or, more accurately, her claiming of the name she found more meaningful - is not a denial of her terrible past, but a demonstration of the value she places on personal relationships in the formation of her identity. By denying whites (and the system of slavery) the power to define her, and defining herself with a name whose origins belong entirely to her and her husband, she overcomes the identity issue that keeps Paul D from realizing absolute freedom from slavery. Baby Suggs's spiritual philosophy, stressing self-love and personal connection rather than a strict moral code or obedience to a higher power, is based on the same principles as her choosing, or claiming, of her name. If Baby Suggs is to be taken as

Morrison's prototype for the best possible black response to slavery, then what is the reader to think of her death? While Baby Suggs eventually dies filled with a profound sense of hopelessness after Sethe kills her child, this should not be taken as a reprimand by Morrison of Suggs's philosophy. Baby Suggs only loses hope because the community abandons her, neglecting to warn her and Sethe of schoolteacher's approach because they resent the "uncalled-for pride" (137) in Sethe and Suggs. At the end of the novel, however, the community embraces Suggs's teachings when it unifies behind Sethe. Morrison's treatment of Baby Suggs suggests a belief that the black community must embrace its history and culture, emphasizing social unity and connectedness as a way to claim self-respect and a unique cultural identity.