

An astounding effects of slavery in beloved by toni morrison

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Words to describe traumatic events range from “unspeakable” to “intangible”. Often, persons struggling with past trauma attempt to find something tangible to latch onto, seeking some sort of comfort and escape from the whirlwind of emotions they are dealing with, or not dealing with. These tangible entities can also serve to validate a person’s extreme feelings of melancholia that typically go hand in hand with trauma. Throughout Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, each of the characters require physicality and tangibility in some way, whether it be through a name, a place, or a bodily marking, in order to fully confront their past “hauntings” and to move past them. These palpable symbols serve as a form of unceasing support for the characters as they attempt shine light on the shadows of their past.

The naming of significant people and places are essential for the characters in *Beloved* to properly move forward from the trauma they have faced.

Despite their memories being flipped upside down, the symbolic names remain unchanged: a firm anchor in the dark, swirling sea of their past.

Sweet Home Plantation is one of the first names to be introduced in the novel. Immediately, a juxtaposition is evident between Sethe’s memories of Sweet Home and what actually transpired while she was there, shown with her description of her previous home:

Suddenly there was Sweet Home, rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. (6)

Sethe refuses to remember everything that took place at Sweet Home, instead choosing to remember the beautiful grounds, trees, and atmosphere (6). The name “ Sweet” Home combined with the physical beauty of the plantation allows for Sethe to temporarily forget the horrors that took place there; she is able to identify with the seemingly good aspects of Sweet Home, hoping that the pleasant memories will be enough to quash the traumatic ones. Although she does not have to physically visit Sweet Home in order to recall the events that transpired there, the aura of splendor that surrounds it, largely due to its name, is enough for her to slowly allow herself to remember the bitterness of Sweet Home.

The Clearing, an area in the woods where Baby Suggs would preach and dance with the community before her death, bears an essential name because it is the place Sethe goes when her traumatic past begins resurfacing in her conscious. With fond memories of The Clearing as a place where feelings of peace and joy were once rampant, she hopes Baby Suggs’ spirit can help her face her past without letting it crush her. After Sethe feels Baby Suggs’ fingers on her neck and Beloved attempts to regain her affection by kissing her neck, Sethe reprimands Beloved (115). This is extremely important because it is the first time in the novel that Sethe shows any sort of retaliation towards Beloved. This pushback shows that Sethe is beginning to make decisions for her own benefit, no longer only acting for Beloved out of guilt. The Clearing serves to clear Sethe’s mind, cleansing her psyche enough to feel like herself again. This is evident in the quotation, “ Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with others, she had

claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (95). Feeling Baby Suggs’ presence in The Clearing gives her enough hope to decide that she wants Paul D to stay in her life. This decision is critical because it is one of the first times that Sethe shows any sort of motivation in regard to her future; she feels almost content after leaving The Clearing. The Clearing serves to clear away enough of the negative thoughts clouding Sethe’s mind in order for her to have room to face the trauma of her past.

Denver’s name is an integral part of Sethe’s past; therefore, it is also an integral part of her recovery from the past. Denver is named after Amy Denver, a white indentured servant who helps Sethe during her escape from Sweet Home and delivers baby Denver (97). Amy’s permanent ties with the family, both through her deliverance of Denver and with Denver’s name, are significant to Sethe recapturing her traumatic memories of Sweet Home and afterwards. Sethe, who finds it difficult to trust anyone again following the traumatic events that took place at Sweet Home, somehow finds an connection with Amy due to their mutual escapism from involuntary work, and consequently places her trust in the white woman. This unexpected bond that Sethe forms with Amy is one of the most positive and defining events of Sethe’s life. When Amy is massaging Sethe’s swollen feet, she states, “ Anything dead coming back to life hurts,” a highly significant quote that essentially sums up the novel’s central message (91). Naming her first daughter Denver means that Sethe is constantly reminded of Amy’s selflessness, which is important because Sethe’s distrust in white people is

what leads her to kill Beloved in the first place. Although it is not explicitly stated, Denver's name is a major factor in Sethe moving forward with her life after slavery nearly took it away.

124 is referred to as a living being numerous times throughout the novel, and consequently plays a large role in the characters' coping mechanisms with trauma. As stated on the first page of the novel, "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (1). This quotation makes it clear that 124 is to be considered more of a character than a house, which gives 124 a key role in the recovery of its inhabitants. 124, although definitely not the most stable, peaceful, or enjoyable places to live by any means, does accept this role of leadership over the women (and eventually, men) who live there. If 124 was calm and not constantly being haunted by the baby that Sethe murdered, she and Denver would not ever confront their pasts simply because they wouldn't have to. 124's constant chaos unsettles Denver and Sethe enough so that they realize they cannot escape their past by simply ignoring it. Similarly to Beloved, 124 forces the characters to deal with their buried memories one way or another.

Nature, trees specifically, provide the characters with consolation throughout Beloved, making it easier to cope with their past. The marks on Sethe's back from the abuses at Sweet Home take the form of a tree. Amy describes these markings when she first meets Sethe in the woods:

It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk— it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for its branches. You got a

mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms... Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God had in mind, I wonder. I had me some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this. (93)

The chokecherry tree depicted upon Sethe's back is meaningful because the tree holds the painful effects of slavery that Sethe cannot bear to remember long after the physical pain has healed. Sethe's infatuation with trees is also evident when she is reminiscing about Sweet Home, "It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that" (7). Trees, through their physical beauty and their ever-presence in Sethe's life at both Sweet Home and 124, provide her with a distraction from the horrible things in her memory, effectively covering up the traumatic memories she has from Sweet Home from her mind. For Denver, the boxwood bushes near 124 provide her with similar feelings of comfort and a form of escape from her continuous loneliness (35). The boxwood allows Denver a sense of release. She is able to let go of the ghosts that surround her at 124 and let her imagination take over, one of the few times she is allowed to act and play like a normal child. In a way, these forms of nature that grow out of the ground keep Denver and Sethe grounded when everything else is trying to pull them away.

Beloved is a novel about the astounding effects of slavery years after it ends, not only upon those who experienced it, but also their children and relatives. The highly traumatic, indescribable events that took place during that time

are extremely difficult to overcome, as evidenced through the plights of Sethe and Denver. From chokecherry trees to Amy Denver, familiar places and memories make moving forward easier for the two female protagonists. Although recovering from such extensive trauma such as slavery and murdering your child is anything but easy, it is the constants in one's life, no matter how big or small, that help the most. Places that have meaning in a person's life are just as important as people.