

# Character traits of sethe essay

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



## **Write an analysis of any one major character in Beloved**

### Introduction

The novel *Beloved* is the work of Toni Morrison an African-American female writer. This is an interesting story that revolves around the period after the American Civil War which took place between 1861 and 1865. The protagonist of the story is Sethe. Sethe's character is built on a true story of a black slave called Margaret Garner who, during the slavery period, had escaped from Kentucky to Ohio which was then a free state. Margaret ended up killing her little daughter after state officials invoked the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a law that allowed slave-owners to go after slaves who had escaped to other states. Margaret preferred to have her two-year old daughter dead rather than face the horrors of being recaptured.

Toni Morrison's main character, Sethe mirrors the actions of Margaret because she not only kills her daughter but also attempts to take the lives of three others of her children after an officer (a posse) follows her to Ohio with the intention of taking Sethe and her children back to the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky where they had escaped to (Gillespie 78). The title, *Beloved*, is derived from the presumed ghost of Sethe's daughter, which returns to haunt Sethe's former house (14 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati). The events at the house and outside it or those that involve the family of Sethe are weird and macabre. For instance, people report that items often fly from one section of the house to the other. Sethe's children are also not spared as her daughter, Denver, withdraws from the public dew to shyness and both Howard and Buglar (Sethe's sons) flee from home at tender ages. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is not spared as she dies while asleep.

Sethe is depicted as a loving mother. In spite of the fact that she kills her children the underlying reason indicate that she does it out of love for them. This is because she does not want them to become slaves and suffer like her. This is also the reason why she plans and is able to escape from her master to start a new life for her and her children. Perhaps this is also informed by the action of her own mother who had murdered her colored children to save them from the ridicule of the community because they would be labeled as children of illicit affairs while in fact they were products of rape. In essence, although her love is expressed in rather weird way (killing her own children) the ulterior motives reveals a women who loves her offspring and would not countenance them being slaves. To her, this is the ultimate evidence that she loves her children.

Another trait that emerges from a keen reading of Toni Morrison *Beloved* is that Sethe is an embittered person (Andrews and McKay 120). This owes to the fact that her late mother is responsible for some of the problems that her daughter is undergoing. Generally, Sethe does not know her mother much and their relationship is ambiguous to say the least. Sethe was unable to see her face well at a tender age due the brutalities that slavery had visited on the latter. Sethe was therefore not able to have the connection between mother and child which is very essential and this left her feeling neglected and denied of maternal love. Moreover, although her mother saves her from death and opts to kill her other siblings, this denies Sethe a family. The mother may have intended well for the two children because she murders them to save them from shame but in the process, she leaves Sethe in situation in which she basically has no family after the death of her mother.

Moreover, she feels bitter about her mother because the latter is hanged after she is caught trying to escape. Sethe feels that her mother was determined to run away from her daughter which makes the latter feel that her mother did not love her enough. Similarly, by apparently abandoning her daughter, Sethe's mother essentially condemns her to facing slavery and its brutalities. This may explain why Sethe is determined not to abandon her children and puts her life at peril to follow her children to Ohio.

Sethe also emerges as being a passionate person (Bloom 13). This means that she believes in certain issues and sets her mind to achieve her dreams in spite of the obstacles that might come her way. For example, she is very passionate on the need to save her children from slavery. It is evident that this owes to her own experience of being abandoned by her mother and being left to fight her battles against slavery alone. However, this passion for her children becomes a dangerous obsession because it leads to the death of her children. Ironically, this mirrors the action of her own mother who murders her own children although for other reasons. Sethe also contributes significantly to the reclusive life that her daughter lives which implies withdrawing from even the black people they belong to. The initial life of Denver is one full of over-protectiveness from the mother as the latter fantasizes about a future in which her children will no longer be slaves. Sethe is also passionate on the need to avoid the issues that were negative in her mother's life. For example, since she feels that her mother abandoned her before and she (Sethe) is not willing to do the same to her own offspring. She wants to give the maternal love that she did not get from her mother, to her children. This trait, however, is responsible for the negatives in her

daughter's life because it becomes an obsession to escape her troubled past and bury the ghost of her problematic upbringing. One can therefore understand the actions of Sethe in the context of her passion for her children and her hatred of slavery.

Another important character trait of Sethe is that she is proud and noble (Roberson 12). From the novel she is depicted as a person who can hold her head high in spite of being a slave and being expected to be subservient and timorous. For example, from her romance with Halle, we see her going to great lengths to ensure she has a special wedding garment for the sake also of her husband, Halle. Sethe is also not impressed by her teacher's insinuations that she has tendencies that resemble those of an animal. This association with animals is to her worse than the physical and sexual oppression that the nephews of her teacher subject her to. This pride, however, can be said to go overboard even as we learn that the rest of the black community is not happy about the fact that Sethe and Suggs live as if they are better than other black persons. For example, Sethe would rather steal food from her employer than line up for rations like other blacks. Her pride is also evident when she refuses to get help from other people and also in her mistrust of men. Essentially, Sethe is determined to live a different life from that which the community and the dominant white community have defined for her and this reveals her inherent pride.

## **Conclusion**

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* has woven together a rich tapestry of characters chief among them being the protagonist, Sethe. In most literary works, writers use the main character to embody the thematic concerns that

such works raise. Sethe has quite a number of both negative and positive traits. The most significant include the fact that she is a strong character who holds her ground and fights her battles against both black and white stereotypes of black slave women. Sethe is also a loving mother as evident from her efforts (though macabre) to protect her children from slavery. She is also embittered because most of her actions spring from the negative memories of her mother's treatment of her (Sethe) and the fact that she would want to give her children a different and better life. The protagonist is passionate about the direction she wants her life and that of her children to take especially in ensuring that they live a life devoid of oppression as slaves. Sethe is also depicted as being a proud person especially because she attempts to live differently from the subservient life that other black people live. In essence, Sethe emerges as an embodiment of inner strength, passion, determination, bitterness and motherly love and the negative and positive implications of each of these inherent and acquired traits.

## **Works Cited**

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