

Importance of remembering the past in beloved novel

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



Modern American culture has largely forgotten about the establishment of slavery and the disturbing, psychological pain that Africans and African Americans had to endure. The history of black people in America has been filled with traumatic experiences, which has had a large impact on their personalities and their connection with themselves and others. In order to overcome the trauma of slavery requires remembering the atrocities faced by slaves rather than forgetting them.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* extends the examination of history throughout the 1970s by highlighting the traumas of slavery and emphasizing to modern America the need to acknowledge and accept the past despite how atrocious it was in order to truly progress as a country. This novel illustrates how the traumas of slavery caused many former slaves to repress their memories thus allowing it to become easier for America to erase the history of slavery. *Beloved* is centered around the emotional impact of rape and abuse experienced by slaves, Morrison represents these traumas through the most prominent character Sethe, who is repeating and revising of the history of a slave woman named Margaret Garner,(George 1) an enslaved woman who like Sethe was driven to kill her children in order to protect them for the sorrow they would face growing up enslaved, carries the physical scars of slavery gruesome violence on her back in the shape of a chokecherry tree (Morrison 19). Sethe would later be attacked by the School-teacher and his nephews who held her down and stole her milk, this act is one that impacted Sethe the most, not the pain and dehumanization she endured at the hands of the Schoolteacher. The effect of her milk being stolen was to her a violation of the bond between a mother and her child, which is a common

trend seen during this time period. The slaves were not seen as humans they were viewed as objects that could be used in any and treated, however, their slave owners saw fit. Slavery was formed by the violence and cruelty that were used to dehumanize enslaved people in order to condone the range of inhumane action used by slave owners to keep their slaves in order and maintain order. Many slaves were victims of such attacks faced by Sethe and were forced to make decisions such as Sethe in order to protect their family member especially their children, who had no understanding of what life held for them would be once they got older. While Sethe's decision to kill her daughter was one of motherly love she was never able to forgive herself and the memories of the death of her daughter have continued to haunt her: No matter how much I wanted to. I couldn't lay down nowhere in peace, back then (25 Morrison).

The trauma faced by the residents of 124 depicts how trauma [] reemerges in the moment of our identification with its past location (George 1). Even after Slaves were set free they were never really able to overcome the pain and torment they faced while they were held captive, Beloved's actions serve as a representation for all the suffering and need for Slaves to conquer the pain that they repressed for many years. Anita Durkin states that Morrison's characters thus grapple with the past that denied them selfhood and searches for a means by which to express their dehumanizing, selfless past. Each character carries their own sadness and is confined by their own prisons, removing themselves from their memories and relationships with other people. Freedom is an empty word because their memories have held

them captive constantly reminding them of memories they would rather never relive.

Paul D. was originally set on repressing the experiences he faced as a slave, after witnessing his friends get burned and beaten, watching his brothers get sold and being imprisoned by slavery, he believes that he must shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing (Morrison 41). When Paul D. finds his way to 124 Beloved forces him to open his little tobacco tin that contains the horrors of his past that he and bring out these memories, despite his efforts to diminish the power that the past has on them, the baby ghost, encroaches on the present compels Paul D. and Sethe to remember all the past actions that they have insured and unsuccessfully tried to forget. The power of memory allows the reader to get a better understanding of the parts of slavery that have been eliminated from U. S. history, the characters individual memories are only a fragment of historical memories. Morrison makes Sethe's and Paul D.'s memories come to the forefront of their memories to illustrate the buried horrors that would prompt a woman to kill her own child. The physical representation of one slave's struggle serves as a symbol of the whole system of slavery; Beloved reminds people that the historical past should be resolved before they can move on and perceive a future. The author highlights how the African American existence can be recreated through the use of their own culture heritage and social structure. Morrison illustrates the tremendous and horrific context of this period of slavery and reconstruction. After the abolishment of slavery, the slaves suffered from the disturbing

experiences that they faced during slavery, which has influenced their personalities and has damaged their ability to create meaningful relationships with others because anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up (Morrison 251).

Although Beloved is described as the resurrection of a murdered infant throughout the novel, her influence is powerful. She compels each of the residents of 124 to accept their individual past, her power is mostly directed to Sethe because of her decision to kill her, and she does not understand that what Sethe did was out of love. Sethe could not bear the thought of her children being attacked in the same way she was, she could not fathom the thought of her children living with the same pain that consumed her mind for many years. As a result of her pain, Sethe is blind from the reality of her actions, Beloved pursues a connection with Sethe in order to make Sethe relieve the pain she caused. Beloved's main goal is to weaken Sethe and make her feel the guilt that she has strived to forget, it is crucial that Sethe face her pain head-on in order to move on with her life and finally gain closure. While Beloved brings out the repressed feelings, her main goal is to slowly destroy her mother as retribution for what she has done. Just like the slave owners who held her captive Beloved wants to break Sethe back into submission, the weaker Sethe gets the more power and dominance Beloved gets over her. Beloved becomes more than a representation of repressed memories she becomes a representation of an

entire community of slaves. Her actions not only represent Sethe's remorse but the shared suffering of slaves during this time period, Slaves faced relentless brutality that has caused not only Morrison's character but every single slave to be trapped in their pasts that have made them unable to move on from the psychological damages that they underwent. During this time period blacks were not allowed to be individuals and were stripped of the self-worth, these characters like all the slaves were treated as if their lives were not significant and had no worth aside from the monetary value for their owners. They were viewed as property that was to be used at the whenever their masters beckoned them, without any thought of their rights as humans, they were unable to form any meaningful relationships with others because of the fear that they would be ripped away from them. Characters such as Sethe and Paul D. have a difficult time finding themselves after allowing their pasts to resurface, this symbolizes the mental battle that all slaves faced once they were freed because they forced to find themselves which installed coming to terms with their past.

In *Beloved*, Morrison aims to illustrate to the reader what happened to individuals in the slavery system in which African Americans were forced to live through. Morrison concentrates on the dehumanizing effect of slavery by highlighting the suffering of slaves at the hands of their masters. The novel explains what happened to Sethe, her family and other slaves working at Sweet Home and other plantations across the United States and abroad, the reader saw first-hand how Sethe was mistreated and sexually assaulted after she attempted to escape Sweet Home, she attempted to kill her children and

successfully killed her daughter because she feared that they would have to face the same mistreatment that she went through as a slave, her husband went after witnessing Sethe get brutalized by the School-Teacher and his nephews because there was not anything that he could have done to protect her and many other slaves had unfortunate lives. *Beloved* presents Morrison's impactful goal of portraying the day to day life of slaves in way that would shine a new light on the atrocities that they faced, Morrison wants the American public to remember the unspoken brutality that African Americans had to face before and after the Civil war, she also aims to shine a light on the sixty million and more who did not make it and to whom the novel is dedicated to, they were ripped from their homes, abused and alienated only to be killed on their way to a lifetime of imprisonment. The sixty million and more who did not make it have been reincarnated as *Beloved* which allows them to reunite with their past and reclaim their identities which were taken away from them the minute they were taken from their homes. Modern America has tried to move on from the horrors of slavery, but they tend to forget that it is a part of their heritage that cannot be forgotten because by moving on from this event they would be saying that the sixty million and more lives lost did not matter. The many ghosts of slavery surround them and will continue to be a part of their lives because even though slavery has ended there are still many injustices that African Americans face.

The conclusion of the novel puts the duty of remembering the horrors of slavery upon the reader. Just as Amy Denver said Anything dead coming

back to life has gotta hurt, (Morrison 35) the images that the novel presents are in pleasant and painful. Morrison aims to haunt the reader with images of stolen milk, the consummation of the enslaved men and cowboys hang from trees, and men laughing as they are burned alive. Morrison wants *Beloved* to be in the minds of Americans when they try to forget the atrocities of slavery, as *Beloved* says You are my face; I am you, (Morrison 216) meaning that her memory is imprinted in every Americans reflection, but because they are too fearful to learn how to read the nation will never get to go through a healing process that African Americans have been waiting for. Morrison's repetition of how It was not a story to pass on echo how this history is absent in America's culture. Morrison urges the reader to consider Sethe's traumatic past as well as the effect that she has on those around her. Sethe's actions create repercussions for everyone who continues to stay in her life, Morrison does a great job of depicting the horrors of slavery with the use of her characters. It is important that the readers understand the harshness and severity of the hardships inflicted upon innocent African Americans. Slavery is not to be tied down and forgotten, Toni Morrison appears to be saying that a community supports individuals by giving them a sense of being, true caring, and understanding. The past can be brought back up to illustrate the present reality of society and help former slaves deal with the continuous process of mourning and healing from the atrocities they faced while enslaved. This will help them find words that will allow them to articulate the trauma that they went through. *Beloved* overstates a haunting mixture of the past and presents experienced by slaves tracing their search for meaning and purpose in slavery and in their newfound

freedom. In order for Sethe and the other characters to gain freedom from their troubled past, they attempt to move to their frightening experience to a place in their mind that cannot be reached easily, because they are reluctant to be confronted with these dark memories. By the end of the novel, the characters realize that their memories are essentially the building blocks for them to create a future. To remember the past is a way for the characters to heal the wounds that each suffered, the novel proves that in order for them to move past traumatic experiences they faced while enslaved the characters need to make peace.