

True freedom in toni morrison's beloved

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



Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (111-112). This quote by Sethe expresses the difference between escaping from slavery and being truly free. The institution of slavery deprives slaves of their identity, their ability to communicate, and their superego, dehumanizing them so that even when they escape or are freed from slavery, they still feel the effects.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison shows how victims of atrocities, such as slavery, can claim ownership of their identities and break free from the chains of slavery. It is through love and the help of the community that these victims can achieve real freedom. Their struggle provides insight into how one can overcome adversity and take control of one’s situation.

Paul D’s experiences demonstrate how he has overcome adversity, claimed his identity and broken free from slavery. During his time as a slave, Paul D lost touch with his emotions, admitting that one should love just a little bit (54) because when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack [one would] have a little love left over for the next one (54). By keeping his emotions trapped inside his tobacco tin can (86), Paul D was able to survive. After being freed from slavery, Paul D was unable to reopen his tobacco tin can and claim ownership of himself. He had been so used to being someone else’s possession that he had trouble loving others. It was not until he reunited with Sethe and met *Beloved* that he was able to open up. To Paul D, [Sethe] is a friend of [his] mind (321). By organizing Paul D’s thoughts and providing him with support, Sethe is able to help Paul D claim his identity and achieve freedom. *Beloved*’s physical relationship with Paul D allowed him to open his heart and claim his identity. It was during intimacy with

Beloved that Paul D's lid (138) gave and his heart reemerged. He was now able to truly free himself from the grasp of slavery and claim ownership of his identity.

Just as Paul D achieved the ownership of his freedom, Baby Suggs' experience with the community helped her achieve real freedom. For the first 60 years of her life, Baby Suggs had been accustomed to slavery and suffered unspeakable horrors: she was sexually and physically abused by her first owner, treated as property, and had all of her children, except Halle, taken away from her. After Halle decided to buy her out of slavery, Baby Suggs was surprised and confused. To Baby Suggs, the only life that she knew was plantation life and freedom seemed horrifying. But after she crossed into the free states, she started to take control of herself: These hands belong to me... Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat (166). It was not until she held onto her name Baby Suggs and got a job that she felt empowered. Baby Suggs used her love to preach in the Clearing and gather the African American community to fight against their white oppressors. Preaching in the Clearing was therapeutic to Baby Suggs and to the rest of the community. Her teachings not only reinforced her sense of identity and worth but helped others begin to love themselves. When the community turned against her 28 days after Sethe's arrival, Baby Suggs gave up hope and admitted that the white men had won. Without the acceptance of the community, Baby Suggs lost her desire to live, turning to colors to regain her desire. Even though she ultimately lost ownership of her self, she did make astounding progress in claiming her identity and helping others claim theirs.

Unlike Baby Suggs, Sethe took a different journey and continued to struggle to claim her identity. During her childhood, Sethe was abused by her original owner who separated Sethe from her mother, by Schoolteacher who beat her, and by Schoolteacher's nephews who sexually assaulted her. When she was able to escape, Sethe decided to ignore the impact years of slavery had on her and focused on protecting her children. This coping mechanism seemed to work until Schoolteacher arrived at 124 and Sethe tried to kill her children in order to out-hurt the hurtler (276). It was Beloved, Paul D, and the community who helped Sethe appreciate herself. Beloved's constant curiosity about Sethe's past made Sethe remember her past and start to move on from it, while Paul D provided support for Sethe. The community helped protect Sethe from Beloved when Beloved became overpowering. At the end of the novel, Sethe continues to believe that she is deserving of happiness and struggles to take control of her identity. Unlike Baby Suggs, Sethe does not give up. To Paul D's comment that You are your best thing, Sethe, You are, (322) Sethe responds Me? Me? (322). Her unsure nature demonstrates that she has not fully claimed her identity but continues on the path to do so. There is hope for Sethe and with the help of Paul D and the community, she will be able to claim her identity.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison looks at human nature and the will to survive. *Beloved* not only discusses the ways in which the African American community healed from the dehumanizing effects of slavery, but it also touches on a more universal theme: anyone can conquer obstacles and regain his or her own identity. Throughout life, people experience tragedy in different forms: some people experience rape and others lose loved ones to

cancer. Unfortunately, evil is present in all parts of the world and victims have to learn to break free from it. Even if the abuse or suffering finally ends, one will not truly free oneself unless he or she regains his or her identity and takes ownership of it. Empowered victims of rape refer to themselves not as victims of rape but rather as rape survivors because, by taking control of the horrific act, they are able to break free of its chains. When a person loses a loved one to cancer, he or she is honoring the memory of the loved one by going on with his or her life and not letting the disease win. Cancer took one life, but it should not take another. In this way, *Beloved* applies universally to all those who have suffered hardships and tragedies and demonstrates that the forces of love, community, and human willpower are more powerful than the abuse or suffering.

People try to employ different coping mechanisms to deal with atrocities. While coping during abuse or suffering is a means of survival, coping afterwards is a means of healing and freeing oneself. The abuse or suffering may temporarily take away a person's sense of identity and security, but the abuser should not permanently stop the person from moving on and living the rest of his or her life to the fullest.

In summary, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (111-112) signifies that one is not truly free until one is able to regain his or her identity. Each of the characters of *Beloved* go through a journey and some are successful in reclaiming ownership of their identity while others get stuck in their past. The book discusses a more universal theme: how people overcome adversity and regain their lives.