

"a hot thing" as a catachresis in beloved

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



In *Beloved*, characters experience egregious violations of their human rights that create situations that the English language cannot truly capture. The author, Toni Morrison attempts to communicate the meaning of some indescribable emotions and actions with catachresis, a literary device where a writer uses the closest possible phrase to describe something that has no accurate definition in the English language (Danner, 32-34). Morrison explains this in her foreword, saying "To render enslavement a personal experience, language must get out of the way." (Morrison, XIX) One issue addressed throughout *Beloved* is the struggle of slaves to maintain their humanity through their human traits, such as their face or their teeth. Since this struggle has no definition that someone who has never been a slave could understand, Morrison uses catachresis to describe the different aspects of it. In her utilization of the phrase "a hot thing" (Morrison, 248), which Morrison draws from Sethe's understanding of characteristics, she describes the feeling that occurs after the loss of a human identity. This use of catachresis is used to communicate the emotion when a character feels as if either they or their loved ones have lost their humanity through the loss of a uniquely human trait.

The specific phrasing of "a hot thing" (Morrison, 248) comes from Sethe's limited definition of characteristics. When Sethe worked on the Sweet Home plantation, her understanding of characteristics was limited to the example "a feature of summer is heat. A characteristic is a feature. A thing that's natural to a thing." (Morrison, 230) Due to Sethe's lack of education, she has difficulty understanding what a characteristic is and she moves on before she truly comprehends it. Morrison draws from Sethe's experience at this

moment to find a phrase which she feels will best communicate the meaning of an indescribable emotion. Morrison chooses this experience to find a phrase for the emotion, because this is the moment where it becomes most clear to Sethe that she is being treated as if she were an animal. Therefore, the phrase " a hot thing"(Morrison, 248) provides the the closest definition of an emotion, which occurs when someone experiences dehumanization in Beloved. This is also one of the times in the novel that characteristics are linked to emotion.

By having Sethe feel she is being treated like an animal, Morrison connects emotion with characteristics in the novel. Sethe fears that she could lose her humanity with the loss of only one characteristic, a fear shared by other characters. Sethe seeks clarification of what a characteristic is, when she overhears her master teaching his nephews to separate her human and animal characteristics, saying " I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right." (Morrison 228) A characteristic is more than just a visible aspect of a person's appearance as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford English Dictionary). A characteristic is a feature, which is integral to the humanity of a person; therefore, a characteristic is a piece of someone's identity. This is the origin of the fear of falling into pieces. The dehumanized feeling that Sethe has in this instance is not the only time when it becomes evident to the characters in Beloved that they are thought of as animals, but it is the explanation for why some characters feel that they could break into pieces at any moment. The characters feel that if they lose their defining characteristic that keeps them human, they will become just a list of animal characteristics rather than a

human being. It becomes clear which features these characters consider to be uniquely human features.

One characteristic that is considered to be integral to a part of some characters' humanity is their teeth. Earlier in the novel, Beloved loses a tooth and experiences the fear of no longer being human, and becoming just her animal characteristics instead. Morrison writes " Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once."(Morrison, 157) The decision to list only other body parts as the pieces of Beloved that would fall next is further evidence of a character's fear that losing her unique, human characteristic would result in her becoming just her animal characteristics. After she loses her tooth Beloved worries that she has no characteristic to hold her human identity together, she will lapse into just her visible animalistic features, which she believes she will eventually also lose. So, to Beloved, losing a tooth is losing what she believes keeps her human.

Another time that teeth represent a distinctly human feature is Sethe's listing of injustices that occurred during her experiences while enslaved. Sethe remembers, among other things, that the owner of the plantation " [whitefolk] gave Paul D iron to eat..." (Morrison 222) This quote is significant because of the phrasing. Rather than referring literally to the bit in Paul D.'s mouth, this quote references the iron bit as iron he was forced to eat. This implies that the iron obscured his teeth, stopping him from expressing his most human characteristic, in Sethe's eyes. The context of this quote also

makes it clear that Sethe is talking about injustices that robbed people to whom she was close of their humanity.

A second characteristic, which is represented as a defining part of a human's identity in *Beloved*, is a person's face. When the characters in *Beloved* remember Halle, they usually remember his face. When Sethe is remembering the same list of unjust things that happened in slavery, she also remembers that "they buttered Halle's face..." (Morrison, 222) While the master of the plantation did not literally butter Halle's face, he did rob Halle of his humanity. After witnessing Sethe's milking, Sethe's husband, Halle went insane, sitting in a butter churn and stirring incessantly. Both Paul D. and Sethe remember the buttering of his face, not the loss of his humanity. These characters thought of Halle's unique characteristic as being his face, so when Halle lost his sanity, and therefore his humanity, the characters of *Beloved* saw his buttered face as no longer being representative of his humanity.

Another time that faces are used to represent a person's identity is when Sethe's mother tells Sethe how to identify her, saying "If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark." (Morrison, 72) While it initially seems that Sethe's mother is telling Sethe that her mark is part of her identity, upon close examination it becomes clear that Sethe's mother is telling her that if she dies, the ultimate loss of humanity, then she can be identified by a mark of her slavery. Specifically, by using the word "identify" (Morrison, 72) it becomes clear that Sethe's mother is talking about how Sethe should know whether or not her

mother is the person who is dead. Since she begins her statement with "if you can't tell me by my face" (Morrison, 72) it is clear that she considers her face to be an integral part of her human identity. This is an instance of a character considering their face to be their defining feature and essentially stating that if they are dead, their face is no longer identifiable.

Through these examples, it becomes clear that characters are able to identify, either their own distinctly human characteristic, or the distinct characteristic of someone who they loved. However, these characters do not describe the distinctly human characteristic of those who they do not love. When Sethe thinks about the injustices that occurred during slavery, she is able to specifically talk about the features which Halle and Paul D lost. When talking about her mother, who died before Sethe could get to know her well, and Sixo, to whom Sethe was not particularly close, she simply lists the things that happened to them, thinking "[whitefolk] criped Sixo; hanged her own mother." (Morrison, 222) Sethe is able to identify neither her mother nor Sixo's distinguishing characteristic. This conclusion is significant because it explains the selective usage of the phrase "a hot thing" (Morrison, 248), used later in the book only in references to people whom the narrator loved and the loss of their human features.

The phrase "a hot thing" (Morrison, 248) is used to represent the emotion the narrator of chapter twenty two feels, when a man, who the narrator loves, dies. The narrator states "I cannot find the man whose teeth I have loved a hot thing" (Morrison, 249). The specific reference to this man's teeth indicate that the narrator feels they were his distinctly human feature. The

next time the phrase is used, it is used after the narrator sees " the little hill of dead people."(Morrison, 249) The reason that " a hot thing"(Morrison, 248) is used after this fragment is that she has seen her man in this hill of dead people. While it is not explicitly stated in the text, she refers to her man as if she is sure he is dead for the rest of the chapter.

Another time the phrase " a hot thing"(Morrison, 248) represents an undefined emotion is in reference to the loss of a girl, who the narrator believes shares her face. When the narrator says " the woman with my face is in the sea a hot thing" (Morrison, 249). She is experiencing the indescribable emotion represented by the phrase for two reasons. Firstly, because she lost another loved one and is remembering a feature which reminds her of that loved one's identity as a human. Secondly, she believes that she and this girl share a face, saying at the beginning of the chapter " her face is my own"(Morrison, 248) So, not only did the loss of this girl represent the loss of a loved one to the narrator, it also represents the loss of the quality with which the narrator identifies her own humanity. The explicit link between characteristics and one facet of this emotion was made when Morrison wrote about Beloved's fear of falling into pieces after losing her own distinct characteristic. It is evident that the narrator of chapter twenty two believes that she has lost her own distinct feature as well from the sentence " I drop the food and break into pieces."(Morrison, 251) In this sentence, the narrator of this chapter has succumbed to becoming just a list of characteristics and does not feel human anymore. This is why the narrator does not experience " a hot thing" (Morrison, 248) again, until she sees the face, which she believes is her own, come out of the water.

That the narrator does not feel " a hot thing"(Morrison, 248) again until she sees the face resurface shows that " a hot thing"(Morrison, 248) is an emotion. This is evident because in *Beloved*, complex emotions are addressed as something that is unique to humans. An example of this is when Paul D. says to Sethe that her love is " too thick" and that she has " two feet...not four."(Morrison, 194) By saying this, Paul D. is telling Sethe that she is not an animal and therefore should be able to love without loving so much that she harms her loved ones. Paul D's discussion with Sethe in this instance is indicative of the belief, held by the characters, that having complex and conflicting emotions is unique to humans. Therefore, when the narrator of chapter twenty two goes without experiencing the emotion represented by " a hot thing"(Morrison, 248) until she once again sees the face she lost, it is because the narrator had stopped feeling human. Morrison chooses to use this catachresis in chapter twenty two to give the reader a better understanding of what it felt like to be dehumanized everyday, while trying to hang on to humanity. When the meaning of the phrase " a hot thing"(Morrison, 248) has become clear to the reader, the chapter is particularly unpleasant to read. Morrison's use of catachresis in this chapter serves to accomplish her goal of rendering " enslavement as personal an experience as possible." (Morrison, XIX)

In conclusion, Morrison uses the phrase " a hot thing"(Morrison, 248) as a catachresis for an indescribable emotion that occurs when a character remembers the loss of either their own identity or the identity of a loved one as a result of losing a unique feature that represents their humanity.

Morrison's use of this particular catachresis is an attempt to express to the

reader an emotion that can not be sufficiently defined with the English language. Morrison's use of catachresis throughout the book is what allows the reader to gain insight into the emotions slaves experienced while undergoing the atrocities of slavery.