

# Beloved essay sample



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Toni Morrison enhances the novel *Beloved* by bestowing it with a supernatural dimension. Many readers may feel that the effect of slavery is diminished due to the supernatural element in the novel. It could allow the reader to perceive that the story is not factual and therefore the appalling effects of slavery are not actually real.

Many supernatural events in the novel, such as the presence of a ghost, push the limits of ordinary understanding, however they do permit the reader to accept them as well as the consequences of slavery, just as the characters in *Beloved* do not hesitate to believe in the supernatural status of these events, but know from experience how damaging slavery is. From the start of the novel, Toni Morrison combines the supernatural with the tangible and the everyday.

Although alienating some readers by its initial incomprehensive narrative, the handling of the supernatural in conjunction with a highly realist, distressing depiction of slavery allows the reader to start an emotional journey into the novel. Angel Flores states that it is “ An amalgamation of realism and fantasy. ”<sup>1</sup> Morrison presents to us a ghost alongside the descriptions of a house, a street and a family. “ 124 was spiteful.

Full of a baby’s venom... For years each put up with the spite in his own way. Not only does this convey to the reader that a ghost is accepted by the characters in the novel but it allows for a white, western reader in the sceptical twenty first century to accept that the ghost is real as well, which would be a difficult task otherwise. The eponymous character *Beloved*, is one of the most crucial individuals in the novel. It would be logical to suggest

that the appearance of Beloved is literally the representation of a painful memory that refuses to be repressed.

Critics have suggested that Beloved serves as the catalyst for change for Sethe, Paul D, Denver, and the rest of the community, and is the trigger which will allow them to come to terms with their past. Beloved is a physical manifestation of a murdered two year old in a twenty year old body. Her mind and actions speak as a child rather than an adult, " If they put an iron circle around your neck I will bite it away. " From this the reader can start to unfold who Beloved really is, they can imagine her as a real girl yet also understand that she represents the horrors of slavery and the bitter past of the African Americans.

Beloved is able to link to Sethe's past by her knowledge of the earrings and the lullaby. The reader can see that this connection is supernatural as the only reason Beloved would know that is because she was the dead baby. Sethe subconsciously feels this connection as well which the reader comprehends when Sethe sees Beloved for the first time and her bladder overflows and she has an ardent desire to urinate; this suggests the link with her waters breaking when she gives birth, " There was no stopping water from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now.

It can be interpreted that the supernatural element in Beloved stand for other unseen forces having current effects on the characters, for instance memory of the past, prejudice and fear. Morrison wants to show how unwanted memories parallel with the supernatural in that they can have a physical and considerable effect on the tangible present. It implies to the

reader how huge the psychological trauma of the characters is and therefore shows that the effect of slavery is so damaging that it is a prominent feature in the characters mind many years later.

Beloved has the physical characteristics of a baby with smooth, unlined skin and soft hands. She still has the hairline scratches on her forehead, all giving clues to the reader and the characters that she is the ghost; “ Her skin was flawless except for three vertical scratches on her forehead. ” Beloved’s greed for sugar prefigures her hunger for Sethe’s presence and her stories. She has the mind and needs of an infant and we later learn that she cannot even tie up her shoelaces.

All of these points indicate that Beloved is the ghost from the past and consequently could allow Sethe to ease her conscience for her act of infanticide. This is crucial as a major theme of the novel is the burden of the past and being able to put it to rest. Beloved stands for the repository of the painful past of African Americans and represents the cruelty that slavery put them through even though she was killed in an effort to actually ‘ save’ her from the horrors of slavery.

The system of slavery deliberately and forcefully denied slaves the right to a family, as we see when Sethe claims that she “ didn’t see her mother but a few times out in the fields” Jan Furman shows that infanticide was a common occurrence as a woman called Margaret Garner “ escaped from Kentucky... with her four children... she succeeded in killing one; she tried to kill the others” 2 By killing their children, Margaret and Sethe are asserting their right to motherhood by taking control of their infants’ lives.

Yet Sethe's brutally unnatural act subjects herself to the realms of the supernatural substantiated by the haunting from the baby ghost. Women on the slave ship tended to throw themselves and their children overboard in order to protect them from the miseries of the life that lay ahead for them. Beloved talks about the slave ship as though she was on it "the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink" This reference to the slave ship supports the idea that Beloved (who is perpetually connected with her ancestors) was on a slave ship as a young girl and travelled the journey of the Middle Passage.

Morrison comments on the importance of ancestry "when you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself." <sup>3</sup> Therefore Beloved's undeniable link with her ancestors, aims to ensure that the suffering they went through will not be forgotten. This supernatural element to Beloved gives the reader first hand insight into the tragedies that took place on the ship and rather than undermine the effectiveness of the novel it actually enhances it. Baby Suggs is dead within the present story of the novel, however she is still of great importance.

Not only is she compared with Jesus Christ "Loaves and fishes were His powers", she is also able to 'feel' a "dark and coming thing" which we discover is the coming of the four horsemen-a reference to the apocalypse found in the Book of Revelations. Baby Suggs has a link with nature and calls to the community of ex-slaves to give them hope and to help them recognise the beauty in themselves. She provides a nurturing and healing presence for those scarred by slavery, including Sethe.

This supernatural element in the novel is not questioned by the reader but is accepted readily and proves to be an effective element in the plot. She is seen as a wise woman who has survived slavery, and after her death her words and attitudes linger in the minds of those who loved her. The supernatural element of Baby Suggs is integral to the plot as it not only gives Sethe comfort when she finds herself struggling to cope with the horrors of the past but she also gives Denver the courage to leave the house and seek help, which she gains from the community because of her connection to Baby Suggs.

When Paul D is walking in 124 for the first time, he encounters, “ a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood. ” In response to this, he banishes the ghost out of the house which provokes it to take on a physical form. Paul D ends up as a victim of a supernatural rape by Beloved. Beloved shows her intent to be rid of Paul D, first by moving him, and then by using sex to try to conquer him. Paul D cannot resist her, and the reader sees an indication of Beloved’s power.

The sex is horrific and desperate and not entirely under his control, but Paul D’s vulnerability and defeat by the ghost reminds him of his own human feelings and consequently this allows Paul D’s emotions about his past to be let out, “ flakes of rust... fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. ” This supernatural element is vital as it is the means in which Paul D comes to deal directly with his past and his manhood. The reader can grasp the fact that Beloved uses her supernatural powers to control Paul D and accepts that this is needed in order for Paul D to come to terms with his horrific past.

At no point does it undermine the calamities that Paul D has gone through but instead shows how dreadful they are that he needs a supernatural element to force him to face his horrendous past. Sethe goes to the clearing to try and feel Baby Suggs presence and to pay homage to Halle. She feels Baby Sugg's fingers caressing her neck, the way they once did in life, but then the fingers begin to choke her. Beloved begins to touch and kiss Sethe's neck behaving as if she was a baby and also smelling of milk. We do not learn what happened to Halle just as Sethe does not know why her mother was hanged.

This not knowing was one of the results of slavery which, in its system of moving people around, effectively destroyed the possibility of familial memory and the correlative sense of identity. 4 The supernatural component in the novel does not undermine this effect of slavery and the reader knows for a fact that a sense of identity is lost and a deep sense of alienation arises due to the effects of slavery.

When Stamp Paid tries to visit 124 he believes that the "undecipherable" voices he hears from the porch of the house belong to the "black and angry dead, who were murdered for no other reason but their colour. The voices around the house link Beloved with all of the wronged black dead, making her the embodiment not just of the dead baby but of the entire abysmal history of slavery. Repeatedly, Stamp can make out the word "mine," indicating the child-like quality of Beloved. Ella suggests to Stamp Paid that the girl he saw through the window is the ghost of the dead baby showing how the community accept the supernatural with no hesitation and therefore

the reader is given permission to also accept this supernatural element quite readily.

The explanation that Stamp gives that the African Americans were murdered simply because of their colour is factually true, many southern whites would purposefully lynch the blacks with no fear of being reprimanded and this gives the reader no choice but to accept the supernatural element of the novel along with the factual elements, there is a clear division between the two and therefore the traumatising effects of slavery do not get distorted because of the supernatural aspect in the story.

When Sethe recognises that the song Beloved is humming is a specific tune that she made up for her children many years before, she finally accepts that Beloved is her baby from the past. This brings her immense relief and she can “ sleep like the drowned”. She is brought to a new situation in her mind by her daughter’s return. She believes wrongly that Beloved’s resurrection will mean an ability to live in a “ timeless present” however the girl proves to be a destructive force for the darkness of the past. Yet by driving Beloved away, the community secures Sethe’s, and its own, release from the past.

Toni Morrison offers the reader a transition between the two worlds. Firstly, she introduces Beloved as a ghost, obviously still part of the spiritual world. She then weaves this spiritual part into the real world by manifesting Beloved into a seemingly live person. However, Morrison reaffirms the old standards by implying that while the two worlds appear to be meshed perfectly on the surface, deep down they are in total chaos. Morrison says



that “ to blend these two worlds together at the same time was exciting not limiting”

As with the haunting of 124, the house seemingly having a persona of its own and the haunting of the occupants inside it, the reader of the novel is haunted by the memories of the experience of reading it. Beyond the supernatural that most people would reject to believe in, the true hauntings that happen to people are very real. The reader can see that although the supernatural element in the novel does give a different kind of twist to the storyline, it also aids in showing the disastrous effects of slavery and how it affects generations afterwards.

At first the supernatural being in the novel keeps the reader reserved, but when the plot deepens the reader can see how the affect of *Beloved* is an essential part of the theme of slavery as she represents all the desperation and pain that was only a small part of a huge injustice. Slavery from history books shows the facts of how the Africans came to be slaves and the things they were subjected to, but unlike *Beloved*, they do not demonstrate how it influences the way people feel and consequently how they commit such atrocious acts such as infanticide.