

The lovely bones and beloved essay



A comparison of the ways that the dead affect the living in the novels *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. In the novels that I have chosen to study, several themes are prominent in both. Both novels deal with a brutal murder of a young female, and the impact surrounding her death. They also deal with the idea of the dead, directly or indirectly communicating with the living. The novels address the theory that ‘ghosts’ cannot move onto the next life until they have resolved unfinished business on Earth. The idea that the living are tied to those who die and untimely death is also present in both novels.

As well as these themes which are present in both novels, the novels also share a similar non linear narrative. *The Lovely Bones* explores two levels of death – both those that are left behind and the departed. Sebold uses the omniscient first person narrator, of the young Suzie Salmon a fourteen year old brutally raped and murdered very early on in the novel. Through the narrator, Sebold expresses her own beliefs, in heaven and our own life process.

Through Suzie’s new position in heaven we see her observing the family which she has left behind, and the impact her life has had on them as well as the whole community. Throughout the novel we are taken back to time before her death and major events that happened to her. This structure is very similar to that of *Beloved*. *Beloved* is written in an experimental structure.

It is not a linear tale, told from beginning to end. It is a story encompassing levels of past, from the slave ship to Sweet home, as well as the present.

Sometimes the past is told in flashbacks, sometimes in stories, and sometimes it is plainly told, as if it were happening in the present (with the highly unusual use of the present tense). The novel is, in essence, written in fragments, pieces shattered and left for the reader to place together. The juxtaposition of past with present serves to reinforce the idea that the past is alive in the present. Unlike *The lovely Bones*, *Beloved* does not have a single narrator.

Every character, even the dead ones, tells parts of the tale. In both novels, the living are greatly affected by the loss that they faced. It is however not only that fact that they have lost someone, but the aftermath and the affect that the dead is still having on them. Both explore the supernatural, the sense that being dead does ultimately not stop you from communicating with these that you left behind. The difference between the two scenarios is that, in *Beloved* at first it is the ‘ghost’ of the dead which affects them, followed on to be it is the physical appearance of the dead reincarnated. While in *The Lovely Bones* it is the emotional affect that the dead have on the living that affects them and their situation. In *Beloved*, Sethe’s house, 124, is haunted by the presence of what she believes to be her daughter, *Beloved*, who she murdered nineteen years previously. Later in the novel, *Beloved* seems to appear at her home and begins a relationship with her and her remaining daughter, Denver.

It is left up to the reader to decide whether it is in fact the murdered *Beloved*, or an imposter. While in *The Lovely Bones*, the murdered Suzie Salmon on takes on human form only briefly, the majority of the time she is in her heaven observing the world below. She affects her family and friends

by placing ideas in their heads and conveying her own knowledge surrounding her death to them through thought. A difference between the novels is the space of time between death and their affect on the living. In *The Lovely Bones*, Suzie affects her family and friends instantly, while in *Beloved* there is a nineteen year gap before *Beloved* begins to have a true affect on the living. Although her presence had scared off Sethe's two sons who left 124 because of the 'ghost' *Beloved* seeks Sethe's affections as well as vengeance for a murder she cannot understand.

In the novel, she serves both as a character as well as a symbol for the past and the sixty-million slaves killed in the Middle Passage. Both books deal with the emotional affect that the dead have on the living. First, in *The Lovely Bones*, in the moments immediately after Susie's death, her soul rushed towards Heaven and, as it did so; it touched a young girl called Ruth. Ruth was sensitive to this presence and despite not having known Susie well from that moment she became intrigued by her life and her death and began to form what would become a strong and eternal link between herself and the dead girl. As Ruth reaches adulthood she becomes sensitive to the dead and to the vibrations that exist in places where deaths had occurred. This affect is not only emotional but life changing; Ruth ultimately leads the police to seriously consider Mr.

Harvey as the key suspect in Suzie's murder. As Ruth is sensitive to those who have passed on, Susie is sensitive to those who remain living. She can read their thoughts, knows their motives, their emotions and their desires. She can remain close to those she loved, she watches over them and occasionally, when they are in a receptive mood, they can feel her presence.

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These episodes are explained in an extremely gentle manner by Sebald and in such a matter of fact way that it is impossible to doubt the veracity of what we are told. Sethe's language is also used to express the emotional effects of her daughter's death and troubled past. Instead of using the words "remember" and "forget," Sethe uses the words "rememory" (both a noun and a verb here) and "disremember." To Sethe, the past is alive in the present, and the word "remember" is substituted with the more organic "rememory," reminding us that everything is held in memory. Similarly, the use of "forget" suggests a lack of conscious effort on the part of the characters; instead, they "disremember" things, with the implication that they force them to the back of their minds. As well as an emotional affect, there is also a physical affect on the living caused by the dead, or their presence. In both novels the ghosts use sexuality for their own personal advantage. In *Beloved*, *Beloved* seduces Paul D even though he is married to Sethe.

She does this in the hope that Paul D will be forced to leave 124 and she can have Sethe to herself. In *The Lovely Bones*, Suzie uses sexuality to feel close to the world and the people that she left behind. Suzie take possession of Ruth, the girl she brushed past on her way to heaven. While in control of Ruth's body, Suzie kisses Ray Sing. Ray was Suzie's first and only kiss while she was alive. Although both ghosts uses sexuality, each novel uses it for a different reason, *Beloved* uses it for her own personal agenda, while in *The Lovely Bones*, Suzie uses sexuality as a way of feeling closer to her past life and the people that she misses. Both novels address the idea that the dead can take on a physical appearance and become visible to the living.

In *Beloved*, they believe that the girl who appears at the door of 124 is in fact the physical form of the daughter Sethe murdered eighteen years previously. In *The Lovely Bones*, Suzie is not visible to the living all the time, and only take on physical form when she possesses the body of Ruth. Suzie's physical appearance is only temporary while *Beloved's* is long term. Another physical affect of the dead, is the fact that they both indirectly cause violence. Both novels convey the idea that violence follows the dead if they die in a violent way, as both novels deal with a murder it is inevitable that violence would occur. In the *Lovely Bones*, Suzie's dad attacks Mr. Harvey when he believes that he is responsible for his daughters death.

In *Beloved* the community in which Sethe lives come to the house to try to kill *Beloved* as they believe she is an evil spirit. Although both novels share a lot of similarities, the one major difference between them is the ending. In *The Lovely Bones*, Suzie receives closure when Mr. Harvey is killed by a falling icicle and when she thinks her family finally accept that she has gone. " I was beginning to wonder if this had been what I was waiting for, for my family to come home, not to me anymore but to one another with me gone. " In *Beloved* closure is felt from Sethe, Denver and Paul D but we do not really understand what has happened to *Beloved*. The towns people (those who believed she was a ghost) believed that she simply exploded or vanished from the front porch of 124.

Others believe she ran away, a theory supported by the fact that a boy, at the stream behind 124, saw a naked women running through the woods.

Many characters believe the supernatural explanation for *Beloved's* disappearance. However, that fact that a boy saw *Beloved* running though

the woods, exposes a more realistic explanation. It also supports the idea that the supernatural elements of the novel are psychological creations of the main characters that help them to deal with the pain, loss and terror of life as a slave. Throughout *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Seebold and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison the idea that the living are affected by the dead is conveyed through both emotional and physical attributes. Both novels address the idea of supernatural events and the belief that life can happen after death.

In both novels we see main characters affected by not only the death of a loved one, but the affect that they have on them after death. Both novels convey the idea of revenge for a murder. In *Beloved*, Beloved takes revenge on her mother Sethe for her murder. While in *The Lovely Bones* Jack Salmon seeks revenge on his daughter's killer. Both novels share a similar structure with omniscient narrators and non linear flash backs.