

From must translate
the hurt of the past



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From the shipment of native Africans to America for profit to the treatment of humans like animals, American history is plagued by a dark history of slavery. The maltreatment of slaves led to each slave leaving the plantation, whether by escape, purchase, or freedom (due to the end of the Civil War), with a distinct narrative and a haunting past. For most, these narratives by former slaves were forgotten through meekness or forced silence. The ghost of slavery plagues the world today as well. Toni Morrison, an avid advocate for diversity and a strong activist for racial equality, believed that the silence of the former slaves would lead to history becoming forgotten, which is important to remember because in the world today, society is afraid to discuss and speak of the past.

Toni Morrison uses her novel *Beloved* to “redeem history” and ensure that history will not be forgotten through meekness or forced silence (Moglen 23). Through her novel, various characters, like Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, are former slaves and are forced to deal with their harsh pasts. Though “it is often the symptomology of trauma one confronts and never the event itself,” the characters are unable to move forward until they each face their past (Spargo 114). Although the presence of *Beloved* emphasizes the tragic lives of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, she undermines the stereotypes of slaves, which enables them to leave their past behind and create productive futures. Morrison writes her novel *Beloved* on the point that former slave narratives need to be remembered and retold in order to help America cope with its dark past of slavery.

To adhere to the hurt of the past would be to fail the requirement of an empiricism rooted in the present and a progressive rationality oriented

toward the future, and, if one is not simply to ignore the past and to adopt a purely present is and a historical mode of knowledge, one must translate the hurt of the past in terms of present possibilities. (Spargo 124). Essentially, Spargo is explaining the central theme of the novel, which is that in order for the various former slave characters in *Beloved* to progress into the future they should either face the past and attempt to move past it or to ignore the past. However, as is seen in the novel, ignoring the past leads to the past coming out and causing much destruction to not only the family but also the town, as “one can endure only so long in the full consciousness of traumatic history” (Spargo 114). While facing their traumatic pasts through the manifestation of them in the form of *Beloved*, the characters also undermine the stereotypes of slaves. Every slave, whether a runaway or freed, leaves a plantation with a trauma that will continue to haunt them; however, by facing their past, former slaves have the ability to break the hold of their past. The few accounts that remain indicate how the manifestation of their history on the plantation haunted the former slaves until they were able to face their past. Frederick Douglass, for example, ran away from the plantation where he was held as a slave.

Even within his years as a slave, Douglass changed his name from “Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey” to “Frederick Bailey ... to create himself in ways that distinguish the mother’s child from the adult” (Casmier-Paz 220). It helped him distance himself from the innocence he held as a little boy. As he ran from city to city, he constantly changed his name in fear of being caught and sent back to the plantation. However, as he “started from Baltimore bearing the name of ‘Stanley,’ the name written upon the

pass that carried him safely out of slavery ... to when he got to New York, he again changed his name to ' Frederick Johnson,'" Douglass was also able to distance himself from slavery, essentially allowing him to break free from his past and attempt to move forward (Casmier-Paz 221).

In Harriet Jacobs's narrative, the character Linda Brent is also a runaway and uses a similar means to distance herself from the past through a name change; however, the name change was not enough. Linda Brent lived in constant fear of being caught, resulting in Brent living in her grandmother's attic for nearly seven years. Although these narratives are similar in some ways and different in others, both narratives have one thing in common: they are narratives. Slave narratives are considered to be tombstones on which the lives of slaves are written (Casmier-Paz 218). The simple utilization of writing to maintain the history and remember the past allows not only the writer to cope with the past, but allows the reader to understand the past. Sethe, a single-mother who escaped from the Sweet Home Plantation, runs to the home of Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, in hopes of starting a new life for her children; however, the past takes form and restricts Sethe from moving forward. Being the only child her mother kept and remembering that she only talked to her mother once, Sethe and her mother represented the typical non-attachment type of love that slaves knew. Sethe has decided that she was going to be different; she did not want to live in a world of loneliness.

Disregarding the stereotype of how slaves should love, Sethe loved Halle, but more than that, she loved her children with all her heart. When Sethe runs away from the plantation with her children to Baby Suggs, Sethe is

finally happy, not only with her community but also with herself. However, this peaceful world comes to an end with the arrival of the four men to take Sethe and her family back to the plantation. With Sethe's overbearing love for her children, she "collects every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carries, pushes, drags them . . . away, over there where no one could hurt them," attempting to kill all of her children in hopes that they never experience life as Sethe did (Morrison 190). While successfully killing her older daughter Beloved, Sethe is forced into a life of sadness and is continuously haunted by her past, hiding this secret from the world outside of her town.

Sethe has an excuse to be a primal mother; she feels that her children represent her and in that moment with the schoolteacher, there was no difference between her and her children (Moglen 21). Her older sons live in fear of their mother and run away, causing Sethe to become over-bearing with her love for Denver. Although she is originally haunted by the baby ghost of her dead daughter, Sethe's haunted past soon is emphasized in the form of the reincarnated Beloved, forcing Sethe to break the slave stereotype of a parent-child relationship when Sethe forms an attachment by catering to Beloved's every need. As a child, Sethe was surrounded by the idea that a woman's purpose was to breed and not form an attachment to their children.

Sethe's mother "threw them all away but Sethe. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them" (Morrison 74). She disregarded all her

children and even though she kept Sethe, there was no love or attachment between the two, showing the slave stereotype of parent-child exists.

As Beloved enters Sethe's family and life, Sethe is forced to face the past in the present through Beloved's questions and indirect reminders of the past. Sethe attempts to become a different mother for Beloved and makes up for killing her as a child, breaking the stereotype. For slaves, often mothers do not keep their children or do not get to care for their children with all the work that must be done on the plantation. However, with Sethe, she forgets about her job and takes both Denver and Beloved ice-skating and caters to Beloved's every desire. This relationship becomes more overpowering when it is seen that " Sethe's eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved..

. She also saw the sleeves of her own carnival shirtwaist cover her fingers; hems that once showed her ankles now swept the floor" (Morrison 249). Sethe spends her time trying to convince Beloved that she loved her and of why she had to kill her. Sethe retreats into the past to a point where " her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" and swallows her whole (Morrison 85).

Not only does the past cause her to constantly think about her position as a mother and whether or not she truly is a good mother, but Sethe also thinks about and compares herself to her own mother. Towards the end of the novel, it is only through the help of Paul D and Denver, after the departure of Beloved, that Sethe is able to move forward from her past. As Sethe

regresses into a child but is later able to move forward, Denver develops into the role of an adult, continuing the break-down of the parent-child stereotype through her past being emphasized in the form of Beloved. Subsequently, after Sethe's infanticide, Sethe attempted to isolate Denver, not only from her own past but also from the surrounding community, confining Denver to a life alone with the baby ghost of Beloved. Denver becomes sensitive to attention and maximizing the communication she has with other people. So, when Beloved arrives in her reincarnated form, Denver becomes very attached to Beloved as "to go back to the original hunger was impossible. Luckily for Denver, looking was food enough to last... It was lovely. Not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other" (Morrison 139).

As Beloved acts like a child, with constant need of attention from Sethe, Denver steps up to become Beloved's parent to form a bond where Denver will finally get reciprocated attention, breaking the stereotype. When Sethe becomes overcome with the past, Denver rises to the occasion and takes charge of supporting the family. In a discussion with Lady Jones regarding work to help earn an income for the family, Denver declares, "' I want work, Miss Lady.' ' Work?' ' Yes, ma'am. Anything.' Lady Jones smiled.

' What can you do?' ' I can't do anything, but I would learn it for you if you have a little extra.' ' Extra?' ' Food. My ma'am, she doesn't feel good.'" (Morrison 256). Though with not much education, Denver works hard to help support both Sethe and Beloved, as both have become like children to Denver, further breaking down the stereotype. Denver believes that " it's all on her, now, but Beloved can count on her Don't love Sethe too much.

Don't. Maybe it's still in Sethe the thing that makes it all right to kill her children. I have to tell Beloved.

I have to protect her" (Morrison 206). With Sethe's past still in mind, Denver feels forced to love Sethe, but with that, feels the need to protect Beloved from getting hurt by Sethe again. As Denver evolves into an adult, towards the end, Denver helps unite the community and her mother to purify the town of Beloved, breaking the isolation that former slaves encounter after leaving the plantation. Denver recognized the need to bring the community and her mother together to move beyond the attraction of the past in order to make progress. Though Denver was not old enough to have her own past on the Sweet Home plantation, Paul D was, resulting in him not only needing to move on from his own past but also to help Sethe move from her past. His haunted past helps him confront the present and breaks the stereotype of slaves not being able to love and that it will only lead to pain.

On the Sweet Home plantation, one of the lessons he learned, which he consistently brings up, is " the best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything just a little bit, so when they broke its back ... well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (Morrison 54). The plantation life had taught him that a slave should never love too much because it will only be taken away later, leaving the slave in pain because he or she loved too much. This harsh life instilled the stereotype of slaves: never love too much or form attachments.

Paul D would " keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" to protect himself

from the ever facing that kind of pain (Morrison 86). When Paul D enters 124, he scares away the only “ person” Denver loved, the baby ghost of Beloved. The baby scares Paul D as it represents starting over, something he wants to do but is not sure of yet. He wants to break free of the past and try with Sethe, but he only begins to feel and form attachments with the help of the reincarnated Beloved.

Paul D is forced to form an attachment when Beloved compels him to have sex with her but also making sure that he says her name, thus forming a connection. He is finally able to open his “ tobacco-tin heart” and realize that he wants a family with Sethe and that he wants to start over. He then asks Sethe to have a child with him. However, the unconventional way of facing the past causes Paul D to still partly be dependent on his past to dictate his life.

When Sethe tells him the story of her infanticide and hopes that Paul D might help her move on from it, Paul D replies, “ You got two feet, Sethe, not four” because of his fear that the past is coming back to consume him again, causing him to walk out on Sethe (Morrison 171). When the community bands together to banish Beloved, Paul D is finally able to break free from the stereotypes and ideas of slavery. He returns to take his place as the head of the household as well as help Denver and, especially, Sethe face their past in the correct way, as opposed to just thrusting it upon them and forcing them to face it. Once Paul D is healed from his own past, by allowing himself to love, he is able to help the rest of his family heal as well.

Throughout the novel, *Beloved* emphasizes the past for each character, as well as the town; this forces everyone to confront their past. By doing that, everyone is able to make the most of the present. Though *Beloved* helps all of the characters move on after she has left because when they broke from her chains, they were stronger and happier, she is considered an agent of evil.

Throughout the novel, *Beloved* is completely attached to Sethe and *Beloved* attempts to remind Sethe of the past, whether it be with questions or with simple reminders of the past, it eventually helps Sethe move forward from the past. For example, when *Beloved* sings a simple melody that no one else knew but Sethe, she is thrown back into the past once again and fights hard to come back to the present. *Beloved* forces Sethe into a cruel awakening that results in *Beloved* taking over Sethe's life. Not only does *Beloved* force Paul D to have sex with her but she also keeps Paul D in the shed and attempts to drive him out of the house, knowing that Paul D is very important to Sethe. By preventing Sethe from moving on with Paul D, *Beloved* keeps Sethe in the haunting past. As Sethe continues to be consumed by her past, *Beloved* represents all that Sethe wanted to be: *Beloved* was pregnant with Paul D and happy, while Sethe was weak and frail. It is like *Beloved* is sucking the life from Sethe. *Beloved* is in a way reaching past to the evils of slavery and forcing everyone to confront them; everyone can move on from their traumatic past, but the idea is that she controls them until they decide to overcome her control.

The power and the unification of the community can be seen as they all fight *Beloved*'s control and purify the town of her. Overall, Sethe, Denver, and

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Paul D are all connected through their manifestation of the past with Beloved, but more importantly, they show how a haunting past can help characters move forward with their lives and how, though Beloved was an agent of evil, she was able to help everyone progress. The novel revolves around the ideas of not only haunting pasts enabling characters to break the stereotypes of slaves in the present but also the importance of remembering and facing the past. Remembering the past helps ensure that people do not make the same mistakes. Morrison uses this novel to help America remember its dark past of slavery; Beloved's cruel mechanism that opens up the past for all the characters also opens up the past for the reader, enabling Americans to face the haunting past of slavery as well. Morrison shows us that it is important to use the correct means to move on from the past, whether it be with a community or family.

The past must be remembered but people, as seen with the characters in the novel, should not be enslaved and haunted by it. When our society is haunted by the past, our behaviors and beliefs from the past need to be broken in order to move forward, providing a fresh start.