

On Magic Narrative Technique in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Received 1 March 2012; accepted 14 June 2012

Abstract

Toni Morrison is one of the greatest contemporary novelists in American literature. In 1993, she won the Nobel Prize for literature, which made her become the first African-American writer to enjoy this honour. Her fifth novel *Beloved* is her representative work. This study centered on the magic narrative technique of this novel. First of all, such characteristics of the narrative techniques as the juxtaposition of the past and the present, multi point of view in narration and the ambiguity in narration are analyzed from its magic narrative techniques. This will help us understand Toni Morrison's superb narrative skills and profound ideological content of the novel.

Key words: Narration; Juxtaposition; Multi point of view; Ambiguity

BAO Jinping (2012). On Magic Narrative Technique in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(3), 1-7. Available from URL <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020120803.477>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120803.477>

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford, in 1931 in Lorain (Ohio), the second of four children in a black working-class family. She displayed an early interest in literature and studied humanities at Howard and Cornell Universities, followed by an academic career at Texas Southern University, Howard University, Yale, and since 1989, a chair at Princeton University. She has also worked as an editor for Random House, a critic, and given numerous public lectures, specializing in African-American literature. She made her debut as a novelist in 1970, soon gaining the attention of both critics and

a wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically-charged and richly-expressive depictions of Black America. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970 followed by *Sula* in 1974, which secured Morrison a nomination for the National Book Award. In 1977, Morrison won the National Book Critics Circle Award for her book *Son of Solomon*. Her other works included *Tar Boy* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), and *Love* (2003).

Among them, her fifth novel *Beloved* is considered the best. *Beloved* has won 1988 Pulitzer Prize and Robert F. Kennedy Award. In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for her novel *Beloved*. Morrison presents a black world that has been neglected for a long period of time because of the white, which arouses the critics' great interest. *Beloved* is thought to be one of the Morrison's most celebrated and analyzed works. As critic John Leonard concluded in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, the novel "belongs on the highest shelf of American literature, even if half a dozen canonized white boys have to be elbowed off.... Without *Beloved* our imagination of the nation's self has a hole in it, big enough to die from".

Beloved, Toni Morrison's fifth novel, was set during the reconstruction era in 1873. Morrison paints a dark and powerful portrait of the dehumanizing effects of slavery. *Beloved* centers on the powers of memory and history. For the former slaves in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and fully try to forget. Yet for Sethe the protagonist of the novel, memories of the past are inescapable. They continue to haunt her, literally, in the spirit of her deceased daughter. Eighteen years earlier, Sethe had murdered this daughter in order to save her from a life of slavery. Morrison borrowed the event from the real story of Margaret Garner, who, like Sethe, escaped from the slavery in Kentucky and attempted to murder all her children and succeeded in killing her baby girl when the slave catchers caught up with her in Ohio. *Beloved*

straddles the line between fiction and history. Through the use of her unique and remarkable style Morrison presents the reader with glimpses of the past which creep through both the cracks in Sethe's memory and the plot of the novel, revealing a desperate act of love more haunting than any baby ghost. Due to the horror of slavery Sethe's murder of Beloved is transformed into what Morrison controversially deems "the ultimate gesture of a loving mother", whose action proclaims, "to kill my children is preferable to having them die". From a single family's experiences, Morrison shows how the psychological and historical legacy of slavery influences a family.

Part of Morrison's project in *Beloved* is to recuperate a history that had been lost to the ravages of forced silences and willed forgetfulness. Morrison writes Sethe's story with the voices of the people who historically had been deprived the power of speaking. *Beloved* also contains a didactic element. From the main character Sethe's experience; the reader can learn that before a stable future can be created, they must confront the slavery history so as to address its legacy, which manifests itself in ongoing racial discrimination and discord. In *Beloved* Morrison enhances the world of the novel by investing it with supernatural dimension. Many events in the novel -- most notably, the presence of a ghost -- push the limits of ordinary understanding. Moreover, the characters in *Beloved* do not hesitate to believe in the supernatural status of these events. Obviously, Morrison chose magic narrative technique as a creative method in *Beloved*. As a matter of fact, Morrison has her historical and social sources to create such a magic novel world of *Beloved*. It is necessary and beneficial to analyze these sources in modern world in order to better understand the magic narrative technique embodied in *Beloved*.

As the first African American Nobel Prize winner, to a great degree, Toni Morrison has influenced American literature. The critics have paid a great attention to her achievements in novels. Especially in recent years, studying Toni Morrison's novels is a very hot topic. There are a large number of essays and book-length studies on various topics in different methodologies. Of course, as a representative work of Toni Morrison, *Beloved* is also hotly discussed. In this paper, the author will rearrange the current situation of studies on Toni Morrison's novels in China. In fact, studies on Morrison in China did not achieve much before she got the Nobel Prize. In 1993, Morrison's winning Nobel Prize for the novel was a turning point for the studies of Morrison's novels. Then more scholars began to pay attention to her works. But there were only a few introductions of Morrison herself and her works. Few critical essays were published. In 1999, a book named *Gender Race Culture: Toni Morrison and American Black Literature of 20th Century* is written by Wang and Wu (1997), which explores the theme and artistic characteristics of Morrison's novels. This

is the first book length study on Morrison's works. As Morrison's representative work *Beloved*, the researchers of China analyze it from the creative method and its theme and content according to my statistics from CNKI. As to the creative method, the scholars focus on Morrison's creative angle, narrative strategies and images and symbols. Xi Chuanjin's *Magic Realism and Beloved* analyzed the novel from magic realism perspective. Zhang Ruwen and Zhou Qun's *Language and Power in Toni Morrison's Beloved* analyzed it from discursive perspective. Weng Yuehong's *Characters as the Narrative Strategy* analyzed it the using time and characters as narrative perspective in *Beloved*. In their essay *On the Shifts of the Point of View and Their Artistic Effect in Beloved*, Wang Xiaolan and Zhong Ming discussed the shifts of narrative point of view in *Beloved* and analyzed how Morrison's narrating techniques contribute to the development of the theme and the aesthetic effect. Wang Lili's *Time and Narration* analyzed the immanent relations and contradictions between the central narration and the marginal narration.

As to the the analyses of the theme and the content, the scholars of China focused on the slavery, memory of the past, freedom, mother love, infanticide and self identity. Wang Shouren's *Walking out of the Shadow of the Past* and Hu Quansheng's *An Analysis of the Theme of Toni Morrison's Beloved* are general summaries of theme and the content. Zhang Hong's essay *Spiritual Scrape in Cultural Contradiction* talked about the characteristics of this novel. In *An Exploration on the Theme of Beloved and the Unforgettable Past -- A Study on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, Dong Junfeng and Wang Xiujie analyzed the influence of the slavery and the past sufferings. The theme of infanticide and the mother love is also hotly discussed. In the *Theme and Freedom and Mother-love in Toni Morrison's Beloved and The Carrying on and Restructure of the Traditional Infanticide Matrix -- The Unscramble of Toni Morrison's Novel Beloved*, Zhang Ruwen and Wu xiufang analyzed the theme of mother-love and infanticide. Jiang Xinxin's essay *The Construction of Black Women's Subjectivity* analyzed the construction of feminist subjectivity from feminist perspective. There is a book length study *The Unforgettable Story -- A Story on the Artistic World of Toni Morrison's Beloved* by Hu Xiaoying, which specialized in analyzing Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In this book, the author analyzed the historical background of Morrison's creating *Beloved* and the current situation of studies on Morrison's *Beloved* as well as the studies on African American literature in relation to *Beloved*. In short, the scholars of China often analyze *Beloved* from psychological, feminist and cultural perspectives.

The most outstanding characteristics of this novel is its narrative structure. It breaks the traditional liner narrative structure and makes the past and the present

interact frequently during the narration. Multiple point of view of the central event of the novel is also an important narrative technique used by Morrison. At the same time, the ambiguity in narration contributes a lot to the magic characteristic of the novel.

1. JUXTAPOSITION OF THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

One of the features of this novel is broking the linear narration in structure. In this novel, Toni Morrison broke the traditional time order and the linear structure in which the past and the present are juxtaposed. The juxtaposition of past with present serves to reinforce the idea that the past is alive in the present, and by giving us fragments to work with Morrison melds the entire story into one inseparable piece to be gazed at. In forcing the reader to put back the pieces, Morrison forces herself to think about them and consider the value of each. From a stylistic perspective, Morrison's artistry in this regard is nothing short of breathtaking.

Very few readers will miss the experimental structure of *Beloved*. It is not a linear tale which was told from the very beginning to the end. It is a story which encompasses all kind of 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 as Morrison frequently uses the present tense. Morrison's evocative blend of details, memories, and lyrical commentary forms a liquid stream that carries the reader along the intriguing tale.

In this novel, Morrison rearranges the time order and makes the past and the present interact each other. Two types of time schemes are used here to narrate the story. One is the past time scheme which centers around 1850s when Sethe was bought to Sweet Home, a plantation in Kentucky, and the other is the present time scheme which centers on 1873. Specifically, it is the right time when the story clearly point out at the beginning. "124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims" (Morrison, 2005, p. 1). In the whole text, Morrison employs the technique of juxtaposition of the past and the present, making the past become a part of the present, and at the same time the present be surrounded by the past. Two time schemes are not clear-cut. The present plot restricts the past events while the past events emerge in the present plots. With the development of plots they are mingled and mutually interfere with each other. The story is set in the present time, but the past always appears by means of flashbacks. Most part of the story is narrated by the rememory of major characters. The present narration

and the chronological time order of the story are often interrupted by flashbacks. The narrative moves constantly back and forth between past and present, and thus blurs the demarcation between them. Just like Mobley comments, "while the slave narrative characteristically moves in a chronological, linear narrative fashion, *Beloved* meanders through time, sometimes circling back, other times moving vertically, spirally out of time and down into space. Indeed, Morrison's text challenges the Western notion of linear time that informs American history and the slave narratives. It engages the reader not just with the physical, material consequences of slavery, but with the psychological consequences as well".

A series of events happen in the present layer. 1. Ghosts haunt the 124 house; 2. Paul D. comes to 124 and lives with Sethe and rids the ghost out of the house; 3. *Beloved* returns in blood and flesh and tortures Sethe; 4. Paul D. leaves 124 when he learns Sethe's infanticide and the black community comes to 124 and helps drive the ghost out of the house; 5. Paul D. comes back and decides to live with Sethe to build a beautiful future. While the events which happen in the past are in fragments. And these fragments are embodied in the present events. And the past often interrupts the present narration. It seems that even the minor thing of the present will lead to the painful rememory of the past for Sethe. Even Sethe runs to the pump water and rags with nothing on her mind, the past would appear at once. "Suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on the harm that did not make her want to scream, it rolls itself out before us in shameless beauty (Morrison, 2005, p. 6)."

From the details discussed above, the reader can see that the arrangement of events in *Beloved* is not presented chronologically but in a dislocated temporal scheme. The reader will more clearly know in what way the juxtaposition of past with present functions in the magic narrative structure. The succession of events is broken up frequently and unexpectedly, and rearranged in a way that the events are not presented in direct relation to one another. At the same time, by employing this kind of narrative structure, Morrison guides her readers into a magical world where various past and present segments are floating in the air. They can touch the past as well as can be brought back to the present. Morrison creates a suspending and mythical atmosphere by this nonlinear structure and fragments of events, because fragments of events are united by the process of rememory. In this kind of structure, there must be much space left between the past fragments and the present fragments which demands the readers to participate actively in recreation of each event. Just as Morrison has said, "My writing expects, demands participatory reading... the reader supplies the emotions. The reader even supplies even some of the colors, some of the sound. My language has to have holes

and spaces so the reader can come into it." In this kind of narrative structure, a bizarre co-existence of the past and the present fragments symbolizing the dilemma of the main characters in this novel: they want to remember the past, but the past is too intolerable to be recalled; they should forget the past, but the past emerges itself. Just as Sethe says to her daughter Denver: "It's (memory) never going away. Even if the whole farm -- every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there, it will happen again; it will be there waiting for you" (Morrison, 2005, p. 36). In this narrative structure, every character can touch the past at any point of the present time, no matter how hard they try to escape or forget. For Sethe, she has to work very hard so as to "beat back the past" (Morrison, 2005, p. 73) on every morning and Paul D. also tries "to put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, Schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, his taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook pater (which are the memories of the past life), one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest."

Most of the chapters in *Beloved* begin with the present tenses, but with the proceeding of the narration, the present tenses are invaded by the past tenses, except that such chapters as Chapter 10, Chapter 13, Chapter 15, Chapter 16 and Chapter 18 begin the narration with the events happened before 1873 or the memories. And such chapters as Chapter 20, Chapter 21, Chapter 22 and Chapter 23 are the monologues of the characters. Too frequent interweaving of the present and the past sometimes make the reader feel it difficult to distinguish the present and the past.

From Chapter Two to Chapter Four in Part Two, Morrison adopts the technique of inner monologue of Sethe, Denver and Beloved. From the respective perspective of them, the past and the present are blended. Especially in Beloved's inner monologue, Morrison does not put any punctuation and she adopts incoherent stream of consciousness approach. The inner monologues are mingled in the fifth chapter. In this part, there is no past, only present.

Viewed from the whole, in order to link the past with the present and show how the past influences the present, Morrison arrange Beloved who functions as the past to arise from the dead. She talks with Sethe and plays with Denver and makes love with Paul D.. Although Sethe deliberately forgets the past, she remains in the memory of 18 years ago. Her sense of guilt for killing her daughter exists in the depth of her heart. She has been seeking the opportunities to explain to her daughter Beloved. Here Morrison implies that Sethe becomes the slave of the past. Under the protection of Sethe, Denver knows little about the past and lives in infinite loneliness. But Beloved's arrival gives her a lot of pleasure. Through describing Denver's changes after Beloved's arrival, Morrison wants to show that people cannot divorced from the past. After

Paul D. makes love with *Beloved*, he decides to begin a new life with Sethe. Obviously, facing the past directly brings his courage to begin his new life in the future. Morrison's such arrangements are not something out of nothing but a specific performance for her to elucidate the main theme of this novel. Standing on the turning point in the 20th century, Morrison deeply feels that past and present are inseparable. In history she tries to seek the roots which cause the present black people in terrible plight. Morrison traces its sources in history and directly touches the period of slavery. As she writes on the title page of *Beloved* "Sixty Million and more" and this kind of structure does a good job to pave the way for the end of the story.

2. MULTI POINT OF VIEW IN NARRATION

Toni Morrison often adopts multi point of view in narration in her works, which is the characteristic of this novel in narration as discussed above. She often chooses multi standpoints to narrate a story. Normally, the same event is presented from different perspectives. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison uses the multi-voice narrative strategies to narrate the central event -- infanticide. In an interview with McKay Nellie, Toni Morrison talks about the evocation of a multi voice in her novels:

"The fact is that the stories look as though they come from people who are not even authors. No author tells these stories. They are just told -- meanderingly -- as though they are going in several directions at the same time -- I am not experial, I am simply trying to recreate something out of an old art form in my books -- the something that defines what makes a book "black". And that has nothing to do with whether the people in the books are black or not. The open-ended quality that is sometimes a problematic in the novel form reminds me of the uses to which stories are put in the black community. The stories are constantly being told, constantly being imagined within a framework."

Morrison's explanation suggests reliance upon collective thinking and impersonal memory, the telling and interpretation of stories through multiple voices. Rather than confirm storytelling as a singularly authentic form of communication, Morrison's *Beloved* engages with the numerous ways -- official and unofficial, central and decentralized, privileged and marginal -- narratives function in multicultural spaces. In *Beloved*, the process of unlocking the events of 18 years ago is revealed and pieced little by little by the painful rememory. Morrison moves around all the characters, allowing each one in turn to share their perception of events with the reader. The important events are not thoroughly described at once such as the tale of Sethe's escape, Denver's birth, the scar on Sethe's back, especially the infanticide. They are told by or remembered through the consciousness of various characters -- Denver, Sethe, Paul D., Stamp Paid, Beloved and other black women in the Bluestone 124 as well as through the voice of the writer, each of whom contributes

to making the mystery clear and moves closer to the center.

In *Beloved*, the central events of 18 years ago is slowly revealed and pieced together. The narrator does not stand in a position where she knows everything but supports the reader's entry into a recreation of events which are unbearably shocking. The description of the central event -- infanticide appears ten times in the novel, every time of which leaves readers great mystery and moves closer to the truth of the event. The infanticide event is mainly told from four perspectives: Baby Suggs, Schoolteacher, Stamp Paid, and Sethe herself.

Baby Suggs' perspective is expressed in Chapter Fifteen of Part One. A mysterious and suspicious atmosphere can be felt by the readers, which indicates something unusual will happen. After Sethe first arrived at 124, Stamp Paid brought over two pails of rare, deliciously sweet, blackberries. Baby Suggs decides to bake some pies, and before long the celebration had transformed into a feast for ninety people. The community celebrated long into the night but grew jealous and angry as the feast wore on: to them, the excess of the feast was a measure of Baby Suggs's unwarranted pride. Baby Suggs sensed a "dark and coming thing" in the distance, but the atmosphere of jealousy created by the town's people clouded her perception because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (Morrison, 2005, p. 138). But suddenly she realized that it was not only the colored people but something else. "Behind the disapproving odor, way back behind it, she smelled another thing. Dark and coming. Something she couldn't get at because the other odor hid it" (Morrison, 2005, p. 138). In this chapter, the sense of Baby Suggs foreshadowed Sethe's infanticide happened later.

Almost in the middle of the novel, the reader gains a vague scene why Sethe attempts to kill her own children. The secret unfolds largely through the eyes of Schoolteacher who has come to bring Sethe and her children back to slavery. Then Morrison moves to Schoolteacher's standpoint about the event.

For Schoolteacher, the infanticide and Sethe's attempt to kill her other children is simply "testimony to the result of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred" (Morrison, 2005, p. 151). Morrison provides a highly shocking experience for the reader by disclosing the mystery this way. After reading Sethe's hard struggle to forget the past and get the freedom, the reader may feel emotionally sympathized with her. He is reluctant to accept such an alien perspective, which thinks of her as "a nigger woman" (Morrison, 2005, p. 149) and as "a creature" (Morrison, 2005, p. 151) equivalent to a horse or a hound. Strikingly, Morrison's decision of describing Sethe's action from the outside highlights and what Sethe is doing: "holding a

blooded-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other..., she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time" (Morrison, 2005, p. 149). If the white man's perspective distorts the fact, Stamp Paid, a member of Underground Road who helps Sethe and a witness of the whole procedure. He recalls: "she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; her face beaked, her hands worked like claws, she collected them every which way: one on her shoulder, one under her arm, one by the hand, the other shouted forward into the woodshed..." (Morrison, 2005, p. 157)". He compares her to a hawk. The comparison of Sethe with a hawk on the wing works to illuminate Sethe senses the danger and she instinctively react, fiercely and swiftly gathering her children into the shed. This perspective remains outside of Sethe and the emphasis is on her instinctive reaction is ultimately wrong. It's a frightening overreaction. However, readers who have gained sympathy based on the previous chapters are willing to wait for the final version of Sethe herself.

Sethe, the mother and the murderer, believes it as a "mercy killing" (Morrison, 2005, p. 89) as well as "the deepest hurt on another's heart" (Morrison, 2005, p. 59). In her recollection,

"she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe..." (Morrison, 2005, p. 163-164).

From this rememory Sethe's mental state can be learnt by the readers when the infanticide is happening and what makes a mother cut the throat of her own baby: the helpless of a mother, the thick mother love, the fear to lose her children, and her abomination of slavery.

Before the fourth telling concludes, Morrison uses Paul D. to provide an internal counter to Sethe's perspective. Paul D., of course, is the most sympathetic audience Sethe could find within the novel and he is someone who knows the first -- hand evils of slavery and who also loves her. But Paul D. immediately rejects Sethe's judgments and imposes a harsh one of his own, "what you did was wrong Sethe...you got two feet, Sethe, not four" (Morrison, 2005, p. 164-165). Paul D.'s response again emphasizes the difficulty to capture the complexity of Sethe's choices.

In short, in *Beloved* the employment of multiple points of view is unique. In the novel, the same event is presented in numerous voices and each retells from different perspectives with none taking precedence over the other. Each time, a different facet of the story is presented so as to form the same and yet distinct story. Through skillful use of the multi-voice in narration,

Morrison completely broke the traditional linear narrative structure which is the main characteristic in narration of this novel. Morrison creates across the barriers of time and space. She interweaves numerous memories and impression into a whole in which the history and the fate of blacks are clearly shown. Meanwhile, Morrison makes personal experience go up to a high degree of national destiny in this novel. Thus this creative technique has a strong shock and magic power.

3. THE AMBIGUITY IN NARRATION

Ambiguity is another important feature of this novels in narration. Morrison deliberately expresses more than one meaning of the events which leaves the readers much more space to participate or respond. Moreover, in some magic realism novels writers do not always like to provide a clear-cut story. The narrator encourages the reader to participate the story telling. *Beloved* is such a novel.

Beloved marks the height of Morrison's achievement, for it is a narration that resists closure in numerous ways and it generates multiple ambiguities that can not be easily made clear. As for *Beloved*'s identity, however, the text balances between the explanations that she is an escaped slave woman who has been sexually abused by a white man or an actual survivor of Middle Passage. And she is also regarded as ones who are Sethe's dead child coming back to haunt her and a representation of Sethe's dead mother. Many scholars at home and broad have questioned the exact identity of this mysterious figure. Many agree that *Beloved* is Sethe's murdered daughter. But Elizabeth House argues that *Beloved* is not the ghostly reincarnation of Sethe's murdered baby but "a yong woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery" (Morrison, 2005, p. 17). Sharon Lessee sees *Beloved* as "all the ancestors lost in the Diaspora, demanding restoration to a temporal continuum" (Morrison, 2005, p. 199). Tzvetan Todorov views *Beloved* as a "ghost within the text" (Morrison, 2005, p. 41). Denise Heinze states that *Beloved* is "Morrison's most unambiguous endorsement of the supernatural", "a memory comes to life", and "Sethe's alter-ego" (Morrison, 2005, p. 207). Trudier Harris reads her as "the nature of evil" (Morrison, 2005, p. 129). Andrew Schopp says that *Beloved* is "a prime example of the unspeakable being spoken" (Morrison, 2005, p. 356). *Beloved*, however, is hard to define in one word. She is a reincarnation of Sethe's dead daughter, a spirit of the past, a memory, a young woman who has suffered slavery, and "all the ancestors lost in a slave ship". *Beloved* means death, memory, forgiveness, and punishment to Sethe, a new life for Denver, and a consolidation with the community. *Beloved*'s uncanny memory about the Middle Passage also offers rediscovered African American history with a different perspective. All efforts to nail down her signification fail. Many interpretations are possible, yet no

one meaning can fully explain *Beloved*. As Denver notices in the novel, *Beloved* is "more" (Morrison, 2005, p. 266). *Beloved* defines all binary definitions and categorizations. She is neither absolute evil nor definite good. *Beloved* is both a monster to destroy Sethe and a life-giver who provides a chance for Sethe to have a future.

Beloved's identity may have two interpretations. Firstly, *Beloved* may be an ordinary woman who has been locked up by a white man and never let out of doors. "Her limited linguistic ability, neediness, baby-soft skin, and emotional instability could all explain that she had a lifetime spent in captivity" (Spark Notes). If *Beloved* is that girl, a number of troubling textual details are explained: her repeated description of what seems to be sexual abuse, her fear of man like Paul D., her child-like vocabulary and her emotions of abandonment, bodily fragmentation and mental instability.

Another interpretation is that *Beloved* is an actual survivor of the Middle Passage. In her inner monologue (Morrison, 2005, p. 210-213), *Beloved* describes a number of details congruent with the middle passage: crouching in the hold of a ship next to dying bodies (Morrison, 2005, p. 210), bodies thrown overboard (Morrison, 2005, p. 211), starvation and thirst for water (Morrison, 2005, p. 210), sexual abuse (Morrison, 2005, p. 212), and finally the loss of a woman who looks like her own mother (Morrison, 2005, p. 211). If we read *Beloved* as an actual survivor of the Middle Passage who mistakes Sethe for her lost mother, their mistakes like "I don't have nobody" (Morrison, 2005, p. 65) and her accusation that Sethe "never waved good-bye or even looked her way before running away from her" (Morrison, 2005, p. 242) have a certain logic, a certain realism.

Even though the text produces sufficient evidence to support *Beloved*'s presence, the most common belief of the readers is that *Beloved* is the embodied spirit of Sethe's murdered daughter. However, the characters have a psychological need for *Beloved* to be that dead child returned. Sethe can assuage her guilt over the death of her child, and Denver now has a sister/playmate. Later, Stamp Paid reveals the story of "a girl locked up by a white man over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that's her". The concept that *Beloved* is the reincarnated child is supported by the following facts. *Beloved* is the age the baby would have been had it lived, and she bears the name printed on the body's tombstone. She first appears to Sethe's soaking wet, as though newly born, and Sethe has the sensation of her water breaking when she sees her" (Spark Notes). Additionally, *Beloved* appears to have some information that only Sethe's deceased child could know. She speaks of a pair of earrings Sethe possessed long ago without having seen them, she is able to sing a song known only to Sethe and her children, she has a long scar under her chin where her death-wound would have been dealt, and her breath smells like milk. *Beloved* has the same name as Sethe's child;

Beloved seems to have supernatural powers to disappear, to move Paul D. from room to room, to choke Sethe from afar, etc..

Another interpretation considers Beloved as a representation of Sethe's dead mother. In Chapter 22, Beloved recounts memories that correspond to those that Sethe's mother might have had of her passage to America from Africa. Beloved has a strange manner of speaking and seems to wear perpetual smile-traits we are told were shared by Sethe's mother. By Chapter 26, Beloved and Sethe have switched places, with Beloved acting as the mother and Sethe as the child. Their role reversal may simply mark more explicitly what Beloved's role has been all along. On a more general, Beloved may also stand for all of the slaves who made the passage across the Atlantic. She may give voice to and embody the collective unconscious of all those oppressed by slavery's history and legacy.

Morrison's own comments appear to support the idea of reading this character as an ambiguous. In a 1998 interview with Marsha Darling, regarding Beloved's identity, Morrison stated:

"She is a spirit on one hand, literally she is what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead. And she must function like that in the text. She is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from the true, factual slave ship. She speaks the language, a traumatized language, of her own experience, which blends beautifully with her questions and answers, her preoccupations, with the desires of Denver and Sethe. So that when they say 'What was it like over there?' They may mean-they do mean -- What was it like being dead? She tells them what it was like being where she was on that ship as a child. Both things are possible, and there's evidence in the text so that both things could be approached, because the language of both experience -- death and the Middle Passage--is the same".

Beloved is presented as an allegorical figure. Whether she is Sethe's daughter, Sethe's mother, or a representation of all of slavery victims, *Beloved* represents the past returned to haunt the present. The narrative structure of the text causes readers to overlook these ambiguities and asks for more interpretations and the readers will be led into a magic world by Beloved with an ambiguous

identity. Through the whole book, Morrison does take a clear stand on the terrible actions she depicts, but she directs the blame against the horrific system of racial oppression which creates this ambiguity, which is an important feature of this novel as mentioned above.

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