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The Utility of Mythmaking in *Beloved*

Historical fiction is actuated by a rather mystifying mapping process. There are infinitely many paths one might take from grounded source material to the imaginative literary space. As such, each step an author takes in this general direction must be taken with purpose and caution.

Toni Morrison, meanwhile, took confident strides in her 1987 novel *Beloved*. Despite its final complexity, the work had clear-cut historical input: Margaret Garner, 1856. An escaped slave woman who, upon being found by slave-catchers, decided to murder her children rather than let them endure the horrors of slavery. A fateful newspaper clipping showed Morrison the story; *Beloved* showed the world her creative response. Morrison rendered Garner as the protagonist Sethe, but she did not stop there. By invoking a degree of magical realism, she gave Garner's murdered children a seat at the table, packaging their mystery and their pain into a single, opaque, towering figure: Beloved.

Beloved possesses an intrinsic insolubility as a character. Her backstory is foggy, while her status between ghost and human is frustratingly ambiguous. Like a rope with no origin, she acts as the force which pulls the novel forward, and while it is tempting to try and trace the cord to some satisfying endpoint—definitively identifying her as an escaped slave or Sethe's reincarnated daughter, respectively—the best we can productively do as readers is analyze the knots and tensions she creates within the domain of the novel.

Indeed, when we let Beloved maintain this superposition between the historical and the mythical, the sociological message of the novel shines passionately through. Beloved the

character represents real Black souls—the "sixty million and more" (3) lost to slavery, to whom Morrison pays tribute in the novel's epigraph—and yet at the same time her identity is just as much an active figment of the characters' imaginations. In designing such a figure, *Beloved* the novel strikes at the psychological and political utility of mythmaking for the Black American community: its potential to let both individuals and collectives make peace with past trauma.

We must first understand Beloved as a historical figure before we dissect her significance as a mythical entity. Elizabeth House argues that there is compelling evidence in the novel to suggest that "the girl is not a supernatural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery" (17). House comes to this conclusion largely by piecing together the fact patterns of the fourth and fifth chapters of Part II, which document Beloved's stream of consciousness. When combined with other clues throughout the novel, a patchwork narrative emerges, which tells the story of an African-born slave girl who lost her mother in the Middle Passage; who, for most of her life, was "confined and used sexually" (20) by a white man. This explains, among many other things, her rudimentary language, her singular scar amidst unworn skin, and, most strikingly, her name: she tells Sethe that, before she came to 124, "Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light" (284). Ultimately, House's analysis poses an illuminating and thematically relevant result:

> What finally emerges from combining Beloved's thoughts and the rest of the novel is a story of two probable instances of mistaken identity. Beloved is haunted by the loss of her African parents and thus comes to believe that Sethe is her mother. Sethe longs for her dead daughter and is rather easily convinced that Beloved is the child she has lost. (22)

House's argument is primarily concerned with Beloved's origins, her intent, and who she represents on a factual, historical level. However, the above statement also strikes at least

tangentially at how Beloved's magic—and thus, her mythic legacy—arises exclusively in the mind of the beholder. Sethe senses her "rebirth" at first sight; Denver watches Beloved disappear and reappear in the shed; Paul D believes she actively moves him around 124. Whether these supernatural acts are "real" or not is not entirely clear or relevant; what matters more is that the characters, in and eventually outside of 124, buy into the supernatural. Their individual perceptions of Beloved's magic trigger traumatic memories and insecurities, yet these "rememories" put them on paths toward healing by the end of the novel.

The entrance of the flesh-and-blood Beloved into the novel is as jarring and magical for the reader as it is for the characters. After a string of chapters establishing the backstories of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, we are told that "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water," "nobody saw her emerge," and, perhaps most strikingly, "she was smiling" (60). The sudden, vivid, mysterious description of this woman almost leads the reader to believe she appeared out of thin air—or water, to be precise. When this woman arrives at 124 and Sethe sets eyes on her, "Sethe's bladder filled to capacity" (61). As she relieves herself, she reflects:

> The water she voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born … But there was not stopping water breaking from a womb and there was no stopping now. (61)

As Sethe's mind wanders to the past, she treads upon a bombshell coincidence: that her current "water breaking" corresponds to the entrance of what might be her reincarnate daughter. Of course, Sethe is not remotely under the impression that she is being influenced by magic at this point in time—but keep in mind that *Beloved* as a novel is rife with leakages (no pun intended) of perspective and memory. With Sethe in control of the past-tense, free indirect

narration, she may very well be delivering a retrospective message that her lost child, whose gravestone shared a name with this slave girl, has been reborn.

In any case, once Sethe makes the connection, the weight of her past hits her full force—although, importantly, not all at once. The "rememory" of her escape and her crime comes in pieces, weaved in with the present storyline. Linda Krumholz posits that "[t]he process of the novel corresponds to Sethe's healing ritual, in which the unspoken incident is her most repressed memory, whose recollection and recreation are essential to her recovery" (406). Once Beloved arrives at her doorstep and the coincidences stack up, Sethe slowly opens up to the once "unspoken incident." Denver notes that Sethe tells her stories in more detail; that she moves away from "beating back the past" (73) and towards actively recollecting it. However, as Beloved grows more demanding, Sethe's guilt metastasizes. She loses her job, staying home to plead for forgiveness from Beloved. She degrades physically, shrinking as Beloved grows, her eyes turning into "slits of sleeplessness" (250). Sethe perceives Beloved as a returned spirit, the only soul in the world who can pass judgment on what she did.

Ultimately, though, Sethe's "healing ritual" comes with the second part of Krumholz's analysis: the recreation of the crime, which comes at the climax of the novel. After learning about the existence of Beloved and her physical and mental consumption of Sethe, the women of the community gather around 124 to perform an exorcism of sorts. Thus Sethe hears as "a sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (302). Note how the theme of water returns. Sethe, in this rather beautiful moment, is baptized back into the community after 18 years, given the chance to feel rebirth rather than the pain of giving birth. The song of the women "broke the back of words" (302) in that it transcends apologies, pushing forward rather than dwelling on the

past. Ultimately, Sethe lets go of Beloved, and Beloved runs back to the river. By taking one step towards her community, she lets the incarnation of her troubled past flow away—for good.

In her experience with Beloved's subtle magic, Denver follows a more accelerated timeline. Early on, Denver adores Beloved and jumps quickly to conclusions about the girl's identity: "Nothing was out there that this sister-girl didn't provide in abundance: a racing heart, draminess, society, danger, beauty" (90). After a childhood haunted by Sethe's infanticide, Denver can barely keep up with the barrage of hope that comes with this girl's presence. It comes as no surprise that, when the two walk into the shed and Denver suddenly can no longer find her companion, she descends into misery, "crying because she has no self … She doesn't move to open the door because there is no world out there" (145). As alluded to earlier, Denver sees everything she could ever want in Beloved. Losing her instantly triggers memories of losing Baby Suggs and her brothers. The weight of such crushing loneliness is only lifted when Beloved returns, "no footfall announc[ing]" her arrival "where before there was nobody" (145).

Denver's dependence on Beloved wears off, however, once she sees home life with Beloved and Sethe deteriorate. Between the constant fights and the dwindling food, "Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (286). Beloved ironically paves the way for Denver's growth by consuming Sethe's sanity. Instead of seeing the world beyond 124 as foreign and threatening, Denver is forced to find opportunity, and ultimately succeeds in doing so.

Unlike Denver and Sethe, Paul D's experience with Beloved's magic is characterized by antagonism. Where Sethe receives worship from Beloved and Denver, indifference, Paul D is somewhat suspicious of the girl from the beginning—suspicious of her origins, her intent, and, to an extent, her beauty, the fact that "she was shining" so brightly (87). This suspicion may lead

into his assertion that "she moved him" around the house, "and Paul D didn't know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving" (134). At first, he tries to rationalize his behavior as "house-fits, the glassy anger men sometimes feel when a woman's house begins to bind them," but when he moves into the cold storeroom and "didn't want to be there … he realized the moving was involuntary. He wasn't being nervous; he was being prevented" (136).

Regardless of whether Beloved moves him through magic or mind games, she forces him to ponder his masculinity and his free will. Between the slavery at Sweet Home, the prison chains of Alfred, Georgia, and his escape to Delaware, Paul D has always been on the move, chased away, made to feel like a "trespasser among the human race" (148). So too in the 124 household: "If schoolteacher was right it explained how he had come to be a rag doll—picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter" (148). Beloved evokes memories of schoolteacher's dehumanizing pseudoscience, as well as Garner's equally insidious model: calling the slaves men, giving them privileges but not freedom.

Paul D is haunted by this past, which he usually locks away in his "tobacco tin heart." However, the significance of Beloved's sexual relationship with him is that she opens him up to these memories. As Paul D and Beloved have sex, he repeats, "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart" (138), which represents a clear foil to the tobacco tin. The red heart is living and beating; red's connection to blood is life-giving yet traumatic. When Baby Suggs resigned her life to analyze color, she never reached red; but Paul D does. He finds his way out of 124, and like Sethe, his memory begins to flow irregularly, telling us the full story of Sixo, of botched attempts at escape, of the lifeless chain gang in Alfred Georgia. Once he returns, ready to start a new life with Sethe.

Through personal interactions with Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, the myth and mystery of Beloved grows in decentralized, observer-dependent ways. When the community finds her,

though, she becomes standardized, positioned as an evil goddess of sorts. As the community women surround 124 at the climax of the novel, we hear their thoughts: “The devil child was clever [a]nd beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun … Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling” (308). This description of Beloved is laden with confused religious imagery one would expect from a disoriented crowd, with consecutive references to the devil, the Madonna, and the Messiah. Through all the confusion, one invariant quality shines: the dazzling smile.

What purpose does the mythical Beloved serve for the community at large? For one, she acts as an enemy who unites them and helps them see the humanity in Sethe. Furthermore, just like in her personal interactions, she forces her victims to remember the past in all its terrible glory before letting them peacefully forget. When the group of women arrive at 124, the first thing they see is “themselves. Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep … playing in Baby Suggs’ yard, not feeling the envy that surfaced the next day” (304). The nostalgia of this moment helps them make moves toward reconciliation. Nonetheless, in the epilogue, once Beloved is gone, we learn that the community “forgot her like a bad dream” (323). Caroline Rody describes the last two pages of the novel as “carrying the losses of history as ‘a loneliness’ that we banish from thought as we banish denied desire” (112). The community finds it difficult to let go of the myth of Beloved, because she represents more than just Sethe’s murdered daughter. She represents a piece of history, of undeveloped Black human life, that is lost for good. Her significance resounds well beyond the pages.

Beloved helps characters and communities heal because she invokes trauma and leads individuals to claim agency over what is important to them. It is precisely her mystery, her fluidity, her enigmatic duality which allows her to capture the imaginations of both fellow

characters and the reader. She represents the countless, nameless victims of American slavery whose stories will never be known or told. It is a shame she can only tell one.

I have neither given nor received any unauthorized information on this essay.

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