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Unforgettable Scars

Man is capable of anything, for the right price. This is obvious through the ages, with all the wars, genocide, and  slavery. Today the scars of all these events are still apparent. Holocaust survivors still have their number stamped on their body, and the echoes of racism is still present today in everyday society. In the book *Beloved*, the author, Toni Morrison, illustrates the happenings that caused both the slaves, and the rest of the country to be scarred. These scars were not only physical lashing marks across the back or brands in the flesh, but psychological and emotional scars inflicted upon all involved parties. Each character in this book went through his or her own personal hell, during this course of their lives, and each experience left a different type of long term effect on the psyche of both races resonates throughout the ages.

The main character of the book *Beloved* was Sethe. Sethe was the daughter of an African woman that was brought over and sold into slavery. Sethe’s mother was brought over on The Middle Passage. Over the course of the journey, Sethe’s mother was repeatedly raped, and impregnated by the white slavers. She killed every child she birthed because they were bastard children of rapists and slavers. The one child she did keep was birthed of consensual intercourse, she was named Sethe. The book goes into detail of Sethe’s travels through life. The most important points that will be addressed here will be those exceedingly life altering events.

Sethe and her mother were sold onto a plantation called Sweet home. While Sethe was at Sweet home many horrible things happened to her. The operator of Sweet Home was Mr. Garner, known as the schoolteacher. The schoolteacher had several nephews who helped run the plantation. One day, Sethe was raped by the nephews. They ravaged her sexually by force, and drank the milk from her lactating breasts. This act of rape was especially traumatizing because Sethe had recently had her newborn daughter stolen from her, for which the milk was for. So by the actions of the nephews stealing her milk by force, they were essentially taking more than just the self respect and the innocence of Sethe but also the life giving sustenance her daughter required.  Mr. Garner taught lessons to his young nephews that illustrated the slaves' animalistic characteristics. This had quite the toll on the slaves, in a very degrading way knowing that they were no more than the pigs, or the sheep on the farm. However, this also had a resounding impact upon the whites as well. These teachings could have been what helped the nephews justify raping Sethe and stealing her milk because she was nothing more than a milking cow with sexual capabilities.

After Sethe escaped from Sweet Home she was caught and cornered inside a barn by a group of slave hunters. Sethe had decided that instead of seeing her children go back into slavery, that death would be a more suitable option. Before she was apprehended Sethe murdered her daughter, who later on would reincarnate as Beloved. Now as traumatizing as being raped repeatedly must be, it cannot compare to a mother murdering her own child in cold blood. This act very clearly haunts her for the rest of the novel, not only with her post traumatic stress disorder-like symptoms when asked about it but also the potential reincarnation of her dead daughter’s ghost in the form of Beloved.

Now these scars didn’t only affect the black community, the whites were also affected by the actions that took place during this time. As mentioned before, the schoolteacher was the leader of Sweet Home. He took over shortly after Mr. Garner passed away. The school teacher ruled with rigid rules and hard punishments on the plantation. The book describes the school teacher as someone who eats little, sleeps less, and works hard. These are possible signs of stress caused by insomnia, or other illnesses. This could be the schoolteacher's internalized guilt physically manifesting itself. The school teacher would treat his slaves as a science project always measuring them and studying them. This is just another way that degraded the slaves and gave a sick justification for the actions that were going on at Sweet Home.

Another character that was harshly affected by the system of slavery was Paul D. Paul D was on a chain gang with three other men named; Paul A, Paul F, and Sixo. His time on the chain gang was so horrible that it caused him to permanently shut off his emotions and develop attachment issues. He was said to keep his feelings in the rusted tobacco tin that was his heart. Paul D found that in order to survive he had to detach himself from anything that might give him hope or that could be used against him. One of the things that was done to Paul D while on the chain gang, was a bit was placed in his mouth. This further drives home the fact that the slaves are no better than animals. This caused not only physical pain to Paul D but also psychological scarring to his masculinity and self worth. It was not until much later after he escaped, and after much help from Sethe that he finally reclaimed a small sense of his manhood and self esteem.

Another character that suffered many hardships was Denver, Sethe’s other daughter. Denver was traumatized at a very young age during his escape from slavery, and the unknowingly witnessing the murder of her other sister. She is an emotionally stunted 18 year old who acts much younger than her age. Denver has this fear of the world outside 124, and due to this fear she has detached herself from the world and remains only inside the comfort of 124. Sethe and her dead sister are the people Denver uses to define herself. This causes an over attachment to Sethe to the point of jealousy. When Sethe devotes all her time trying to help Paul D recover from his trauma issues, Denver was very rude, and cold to him. This showed how she could outwardly project her jealousy of someone else obtaining the attention of her mother. Later on in the book, Denver begins to overcome her issues and rallies the community to help exorcise the spirit known as Beloved. After all is said and done Denver attempts to normalize her life by taking school lessons and contemplating higher education. This new found drive for schooling has filled the hole that was originally designated only for the attention her mother gave her.

Stamp Paid and Ella were both workers for the Underground Railroad at this time. Stamp Paid was a man scarred by his past but has tried to move on by adopting an entirely new identity. Stamp Paid was a slave who also had a wife on the plantation on which he was owned. One day the owner had his sons rape and murder his wife after Stamp Paid attempted to run away the first time. He then shed his original name and took on the name Stamp Paid to symbolize that he has paid his dues for his freedom, through sweat, blood, and lost love. He has some of the deepest scars on his soul, having to live with the idea that his freedom was bought with his wife’s screams, pain, and eventually her death. This would drive many men to madness or to death. However, Stamp Paid has taken this as an opportunity to help as many people as he can so they never have to take on the burden that he has to carry every day. The affects of slavery has helped the black community build a sense of interdependency that is still seen today.

Ella was an associate of Stamp Paid on the Underground Railroad. She was rescued by Stamp from a white father and son who had her imprisoned. They had held her captive and taken turns raping her for several years. This is another soul shattering experience that would drive most people to madness. Instead Ella wields her scars and uses her hate to push her forward to help the other slaves in need.

All of these characters, both slaves, owners, and regardless of race, have had their perspective on life warped. They all have accumulated physical, psychological, and emotional damages. These will continue to haunt them until the day they die. However with enough hope and support from a community, they may be able to move past this and one day live in peace and harmony. Scars stay even after the blood has been dried and the events have been forgotten by the public. The evils of man will continue to weigh heavy on the hearts of those involved and witnessing the events. It is only true community and acceptance can we move on and become better as a whole. This was clearly shown to us by Toni Morrison in the book *Beloved* and we should all go forth and use this as a guide to heal the scars of the world.