Sethe's Choice: "Beloved" and the Ethics of Reading

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Morrison's Unusual Guidance

> Now, too late, [Stamp Paid] understood [Baby Suggs]. The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn't count. They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice. (180)

"Sethe's rough choice," her decision to kill her daughter rather than have her become a slave at the plantation they called Sweet Home, is at once the most stunning and most important event in Morrison's novel. Stunning for obvious reasons: how can the love of a mother for her child lead her to murder the child? Important not only because the temporal, psychological, structural, and thematic logic of the novel flows from that event but also because Morrison's treatment of it presents her audience with a difficult and unusual ethical problem. In order to appreciate the events of the present time of the narrative—1873—we need to know what happened in the woodshed behind 124 Bluestone Rd. on an August afternoon in 1855. In order to understand the characters of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in 1873, we need to know that on that afternoon Sethe reached for the handsaw before schoolteacher could reach for her or her children. In order to come to terms with the novel's progression, affective power, and thematic import, we need to come to ethical terms with Sethe's choice to pull the handsaw across the neck of her daughter.[1] The problem arises because Morrison stops short of taking any clear ethical stand on Sethe's rough choice, but instead presents it as something that she, like Baby Suggs, can neither approve nor condemn. This essay will seek to explore the ethics of reading Sethe's choice by (1) contextualizing Morrison's treatment of it in relation to the typical relation between implied author and audience in ethically complex texts; (2) analyzing the narrative strategies Morrison uses to offer some limited guidance to our ethical judgment without clearly signaling her own assessment; and (3) examining the consequences of that treatment for our relation to Sethe and, ultimately, to Morrison herself; and (4) considering the implications of Morrison's treatment for any larger conclusions we might draw about the ethical dimension of reading narrative. Let me begin by sketching my approach to the ethics of reading.

I regard the ethical dimension of reading as an inextricable part of approaching narrative as rhetoric. To approach narrative as rhetoric is to understand narrative as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened. This rhetorical act involves a multi-leveled communication from author to audience, one that involves the audience's intellect, emotions, psyche, and values. Furthermore, these levels interact with each other. Our values and those set forth by the implied author affect our judgments of characters, our judgments affect our emotions, and the trajectory of our feelings is linked to the psychological and thematic effects of the narrative. Furthermore, the communicative situation of narrative—somebody telling somebody else that something happened—is itself an ethical situation. The teller's treatment of the events will inevitably convey certain attitudes toward the audience, attitudes that indicate his or her sense of responsibility to and regard for the audience. Similarly, the audience's response to the narrative will indicate their commitments to the teller, the narrative situation, and to the values expressed in the narrative.[2]

Among the many approaches to ethics now being developed, this one is most closely related to those of Wayne C. Booth and of Adam Zachary Newton.[3] Each of them, like me, wants to root narrative ethics in narrative itself rather than in some abstract ethical system. Indeed, Booth emphasizes the pervasiveness of ethics in critical responses to literature, and Newton says that he wants to conceive of "narrative *as* ethics." Each of them moves, in his own way, from narrative to theoretical treatments of narrative and then back to narrative. In Booth's case, those theoretical treatments can be found in his own earlier work on the rhetoric of literature. His title, *The Company We Keep*, and his main metaphor, books as friends, grow out of his earlier exploration of the way that writing and reading make possible a meeting of minds between author and reader. *The Company We Keep* moves beyond Booth's earlier major emphasis on how such meetings occur to the contemplation of how our values are engaged in such meetings; the book is especially concerned with the ethical consequences of desiring as the text invites us to desire. *The Company We Keep* also gives greater emphasis to the communal nature of ethical response, suggesting that the activity of discussing the values of texts, what Booth calls coducing, is ethically more important than getting the text "right."

Newton investigates the "ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process" (11). His investigation leads him to describe three kinds of ethical structure in narrative: the narrational, the representational, and the hermeneutic. Narrational ethics are those associated with the telling; they occur along the line of narrative transmission from author to narrator to narratee to reader. Representational ethics are those associated with "fictionalizing person" or creating character. Hermeneutic ethics are

those associated with reading and interpreting, the obligations readers and critics have to the text. Newton synthesizes work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Stanley Cavell, and Emmanuel Levinas as he does his analyses, borrowing especially Bakhtin's concept of *vhzivanie* or live-entering (empathy with the Other without loss of self), Cavell's concept of acknowledging (being in a position of having to respond), and Levinas's of Saying (performing a telling) and Facing (looking at or looking away).

While I share much with Booth and with Newton, I do not want to adopt Booth's overarching metaphor of books as friends, because it seems too limiting, or Newton's idea that narrative is equivalent to ethics, because that seems not to recognize all the other things narrative is as well. Furthermore, although I find Bakhtin, Cavell, and Levinas all to be strong theorists, I am less inclined than Newton to look to theory for recurrent ethical concerns and more inclined to let individual narratives develop their own sets of ethical topoi. Like both Booth and Newton, I focus on how the very act of reading entails ethical engagement and response, but I attend more than either of them does to the links among technique (the signals offered by the text) and the reader's cognitive understanding, emotional response, and ethical positioning. Indeed, the central construct in my approach to the ethics of reading is *position*, a concept that combines *acting from* and *being placed* in an ethical location. Our ethical position at any point in a narrative results from the dynamic interaction of four ethical situations:

- that of the characters within the story world;
- that of the narrator in relation to the telling and to the audience; unreliable narration, for example, constitutes a different ethical position from reliable narration; different kinds of focalization also position the audience differently;
- that of the implied author in relation to the authorial audience; the implied author's choices to adopt one narrative strategy rather than another will affect the audience's ethical response to the characters; each choice will also convey the author's attitudes toward the audience;
- that of the flesh and blood reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations that the narrative invites one to occupy.

While the ethical dimension of reading engages our values and judgments, it is deeply intertwined with cognition, emotion, and desire: our understanding influences our sense of which values the text is calling forth, the activation of those values influences our judgments, our judgments influence our feelings, and our feelings our desires. And the other way around.

As this sketch indicates, I assume that authors will attempt to guide us toward particular ethical positions on their characters' actions, and it is easy to show that authorial practice provides a strong warrant for the assumption. In some cases, the guidance is very clear and the position easy to occupy: Henry Fielding, for example, guides us to recognize that Tom Jones's actions

are always ethically superior to those of Blifil. In some cases, the key to the narrative progression is the evolution of the protagonists' own ethical understanding and corresponding behavior: Jane Austen, for example, positions us to recognize the initial ethical deficiencies of both Elizabeth Bennett and Fitzwilliam Darcy and then represents the amelioration of those deficiencies, an amelioration that in turn prepares the way for their happy union. In some cases, authors will present us with characters who face difficult ethical decisions and then guide us to see both the difficulty and their own judgment of the situation: Joseph Conrad, for example, allows Jim to tell the story of how he jumped from the Patna but uses characters such as Brierly, who commits suicide because he sees himself in Jim, and the French lieutenant, who clearly states that the sailor's duty is to say with the ship, to indicate both the depth of Jim's temptation and the unequivocal negative judgment of his action. In some cases, authors will show characters who transgress standard societal and legal norms but nevertheless follow an ethically superior path: Ken Kesey, for example, represents Chief Bromden's killing of the lobotomized McMurphy not as a horrible murder but rather as an act of both mercy and courage. Even in situations where authors have written famously ambiguous narratives, the ethical positions within each side of the ambiguity are likely to be clearly delineated: Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, has sketched a portrait either of a heroic governess who risks her own safety in order to protect the children in her care against evil ghosts or of a psychotic woman whose delusions constitute a serious threat to those children.

In short, providing ethical guidance to their audiences is one of the chief things that implied authors do: writing narrative involves taking ethical stands and communicating those stands explicitly or implicitly, heavy-handedly or subtly—or anything in between—to one's audience. Indeed, recognizing this communication helps us recognize that the default ethical relation between implied author and authorial audience in narrative is one of reciprocity. Each party both gives and receives. Authors give, among other things, guidance through ethical complexity and expect to receive in return their audiences' interest and attention. Audiences give that interest and attention and expect to receive in return authorial guidance. The default assumption of course need not always be in place, but deviating from it necessarily entails certain risks. Audiences who place their own interests (ideologies, politics, ethics) at the center of their reading risk turning reading into a repetitious activity that misses the ways in which authors can extend their vision of human possibility and experience. Authors who don't provide guidance or who take aggressive stances toward their audiences risk alienating those audiences to the point of losing them. An author who stops short of conveying her own ethical judgment of an action that is central to her narrative is doing something extraordinarily unusual—and extraordinarily risky. The narrative may fall apart because the center will not hold, or the narrative will become an inscrutable

black hole, which absorbs every element of the work into its inscrutability. That *Beloved* escapes both risks is one sign of Morrison's remarkable achievement.

Establishing Ethical Position

As we turn to look at the interaction in *Beloved* among the four ethical situations I identified above, the third one—the relation of the implied author to the telling and to the authorial audience—stands out as the key to the ethical problem of the novel. If we can work through the ethical implications of Morrison's narrative strategies, we should be able to come to terms with her decision not to take a final stand on Sethe's choice. That working through means attending to the ethical consequences of several key authorial decisions: (1) about where in the progression of the narrative to disclose the information about Sethe's choice—at the end of Part One rather than earlier or later, after some hints about the event before it is revealed; (2) about how to disclose the information—through three different tellings, one focalized through the white men who come to reclaim Sethe and her children for Sweet Home; one focalized through Stamp Paid; and one from Sethe's own perspective; and (3) about how to link those tellings to other key moments in the narrative where her ethical stances are clearer.

Morrison's now famous opening focuses on the ghostly presence of a baby in the female space of 124 Bluestone Rd.: "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom" (3). Shortly after that, Morrison has the narrator add a cryptic reference to the baby's dying as part of a summary of Sethe's situation: "not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, *more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil*" (5 my emphasis). In one of Sethe's early conversations with Paul D about Denver, she makes reference to the events of August 1855 without telling the whole story:

> "And when the schoolteacher found us and came busting in here with the law and a shotgun—"
>
> "Schoolteacher found you?"
>
> "Took a while, but he did. Finally."
>
> "And he didn't take you back?"
>
> "Oh, no, I wasn't going back there. I don't care who found who. Any life but that one. I went to jail instead. [. . .]"
>
> Paul D turned away. He wanted to know more about it, but jail put him back in Alfred, Georgia. (42)

The first half of the novel is, in fact, filled with such incomplete, indirect, or cryptic allusions and references to Sethe's rough choice.[4] Consequently, Morrison establishes a significant tension between the implied author (and the narrator), who know about Sethe's rough choice, and the authorial audience who get only these partial, indirect, and cryptic references. This tension creates an aura not just of mystery but also of privilege around the mystery; each reference increases the audience's sense of its importance and the audience's desire to resolve the tension. The strategy of deferral establishes an ethical obligation on Morrison's part to provide some resolution to the tension, even as it compliments the audience on its abilities to register the various hints and to wait for the resolution. In the meantime, Morrison is providing careful ethical guidance through her complex narrative.

Although that guidance is carefully nuanced, its broad outlines are clear. First, by employing a protean narrator who exercises the privilege of giving us inside views of the major characters—Sethe, Paul D, Denver, and Baby Suggs—and who also comments directly on the action and the characters, Morrison seeks to multiply the number of valorized ethical perspectives. For example, Sethe, Paul D, and Denver all have very different feelings and judgments about Paul D's entering the house at 124 Bluestone Rd. Rather than privileging any one character's view and the values upon which it is based, Morrison asks us to enter into each character's consciousness and to recognize the validity of his or her feelings and judgments.[5] Second, Morrison establishes slavery not just as an abstract evil but as one that even in 1873 has continuing and profound negative effects on Sethe and Paul D—and thus, on Denver and every one else in their circle. Indeed, Morrison's representation of slavery guides us to recognize the historical validity of Baby Suggs's conclusion that "there is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (89). This ethical position is all the more compelling because slavery at the Garners' Sweet Home plantation was relatively benevolent. Third, Morrison identifies Sethe's habit of "beating back the past," her efforts to repress the events of 1855, as both impossible and dangerous; the consequence of this move is to increase the pressure on the revelation of those events—Sethe's future will be determined by what happens when she faces rather than beats back that past.

While establishing this context, Morrison builds toward the revelation of Sethe's choice by both providing enough information about 1855 for us to understand what is at stake for Sethe when schoolteacher arrives at 124 and by taking the events of 1873 forward to the point where Paul D asks her to have his child. The resolution of the tension, then, not only provides the audience with crucial information that makes the situation in 1873 intelligible but it also provides a major turning point in the development of that situation. Each of the three tellings—and the triangulation of all three—contributes to the resolution and especially to the ethical guidance Morrison does and does not provide. As noted above, the first telling is focalized through the white

men who come to return Sethe and her children to slavery; the following passage, in which the focalization begins with the slave catcher and then shifts to schoolteacher, is a representative example:[6]

> Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere—in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at—the old nigger boy, still mewing, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arch of its mother's swing.
>
> Right off, it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. [. . .S]he'd gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it to beyond the point of education. Or Chipper, or Samson. Suppose you beat the hounds past that point thataway. Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else. You'd be feeding them maybe, holding out a piece of rabbit in your hand and the animal would revert—bite your hand clean off. [. . .] The whole lot was lost now. Five. He could claim the baby struggling in the arms of the mewing old man, but who'd tend her? Because the woman—something was wrong with her. She was looking at him now, and if his other nephew could see that look he would learn the lesson for sure: you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success. (149-50)

By unraveling the mystery this way, Morrison provides a highly unsettling experience for the audience. After seeing Sethe from the inside for so long, we feel emotionally, psychologically—and ethically—jarred by seeing her from what is such an alien perspective, one that thinks of her as "a nigger woman" and as a "creature" equivalent to a horse or a hound. Indeed, Morrison has chosen to narrate this first telling from an ethical perspective that we easily repudiate. Not only does schoolteacher regard Sethe as a dog who no longer trusts its master, but he is also concerned only with himself and his loss, not at all with Sethe or her children. Strikingly, however, Morrison's strategy of moving away from Sethe's perspective and describing her actions from the outside highlights both the inadequacy of schoolteacher's racist perspective and the horror of what Sethe is doing: "holding a blood-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." If the shift in perspective is jarring, the revelation of Sethe's action is shocking. The physical description is not pretty, and it is not possible to find a way to make it pretty. At the same time, the physical description is not loaded with any ethical evaluation from Morrison. Instead, she just leaves it out there uncorrected—the description may be from the slave catcher's angle of vision, but there is no sign that the angle distorts his view of the physical action—and asks us to come to terms with it on our own.

Morrison does, however, leave space for us to defer that coming to terms. Since this first telling picks up the story after the white men have entered the shed, it does not explain how or why Sethe went there with her

children. In the second telling, Morrison addresses that aspect of the story. The perspective here belongs to Stamp Paid; the telling occurs as part of a recollection he is prepared to share with Paul D but does not because Paul insists that the woman in the newspaper story Stamp gives him cannot be Sethe:

> So Stamp Paid did not tell him how she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how 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 filled with just sunlight and shavings now because there wasn't any wood. The party had used it all, which is why he was chopping some. Nothing was in that shed, he knew, having been there early that morning. Nothing but sunlight. Sunlight, shavings, a shovel. The ax he himself took out. Nothing was in there except the shovel—and of course the saw. (157)

Because Paul D holds fast to his belief that the woman in the story was not Sethe, Stamp wonders "if it had happened at all, eighteen years ago, that while he and Baby Suggs were looking the wrong way, a pretty little slavegirl had recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children" (158).

Stamp Paid, too, sees Sethe from the outside, and though he also compares her to an animal, he does not reduce her to one. Indeed, the comparison of Sethe with a hawk on the wing works to illuminate the how and why: because Sethe senses danger, she instinctively reacts, fiercely and swiftly gathering her children into the shed. Because the perspective remains outside of Sethe and because the emphasis is on her instinctive reaction, Morrison's technique again stops short of rendering any clear ethical judgment. But Stamp Paid's final thought once again foregrounds the horror of what Sethe is doing: "a pretty little slavegirl [. . .] split to the woodshed to kill her children." The contrast between the condescending description, "pretty little slavegirl," and the plain statement of her purpose, "to kill her children" has complex ethical effects. The plain statement, when juxtaposed to the description of Sethe swinging her baby toward the wall, may initially move us toward concluding that Sethe's instinctive reaction is ultimately wrong—however instinctive, it's a frightening overreaction. But the condescending description, in combination with the power of our previous sympathy for Sethe, gives us space to defer any final conclusion yet again. If Stamp Paid is wrong about who Sethe is, perhaps he's also wrong about her purpose. But even as we defer a final judgment, we continue to contemplate the almost unbelievable horror of what Sethe has done. We may wish to adopt Paul D's attitude of denial, but, with this second telling through a more sympathetic focalizer, Morrison has effectively eliminated that coping strategy from our repertoire.

Sethe's own telling to Paul D—with occasional further commentary by the narrator—is, not surprisingly, the longest version of the story. Sethe circles the room as she talks, much as the novel has circled the event up until these three tellings. Sethe begins not with the day that the four horsemen rode into

the yard but rather with her arrival at 124 twenty days earlier and the pride and love she felt as a result of that accomplishment:

> "We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. [. . .] It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to."
>
> "[. . .] I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher." (162-63)

With Sethe's words to Paul D as background, Morrison shifts to Sethe's thoughts:

> Sethe knew that [. . .] she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off-—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple. [. . . W]hen 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. 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. [. . .]
>
> "I stopped him," she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe." (163-64).

Sethe's version is obviously a strong counter to the earlier two: her purpose was not to kill but to protect, her motivation was love, and the action was a success. She does act instinctively, but the instincts are those of motherlove. The animal imagery here does not suggest anything about her agency but rather about an association between schoolteacher and a feeling in her head—a matter I will return to below.

Thus, the progression of the stories gives us a progression of possibilities for ethical judgment: Sethe has committed a subhuman action; Sethe has done the wrong thing but done it instinctively and understandably; Sethe has done something difficult but heroic because it is done for the best motives and it turns out to be a success. Since the progression of the narrative perspectives, from outside to inside, from the white men's to Stamp Paid's to Sethe's, is a progression toward increasingly sympathetic views, we might be inclined to conclude that Morrison is guiding us toward accepting Sethe's version. Furthermore, if we stay inside Sethe's perspective, her account is very compelling. But the triangulation of all three stories indicates that Morrison doesn't want Sethe's story to be the authoritative version because that triangulation calls attention to what Sethe leaves out of her account: the handsaw, the slit throat, the blood, the swinging of the baby toward the wall. In short,

Sethe's telling isn't definitive because it erases the horror of her murdering her child under its talk of motivations (love) and purpose (safety).

Furthermore, before the third 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 world of the novel, someone who knows first-hand the evils of slavery and who also loves her. But Paul D immediately rejects Sethe's judgments and imposes his own, much harsher ones. Morrison's narrator shows that he immediately thinks, "[W]hat she wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety" (164). Morrison also has Paul D say to Sethe that "your love is too thick," that "what you did was wrong, Sethe," and that "you got two feet, Sethe, not four" (163-65).

Of these responses, the first resonates most with the authorial audience. Our own experience of the narrative to this point shows that 124 has not been a safe place: it is literally haunted by the ghost of the dead baby and her return as Beloved, metaphorically haunted by the consequences of Sethe's rough choice. Furthermore, Sethe's own constant work "of beating back the past" indicates that her narrative does not accurately capture the complexity of her choice. Part Two will give further evidence, in Sethe's extreme efforts to expiate her guilt toward Beloved, that she herself does not fully believe that her choice was the right one.

But Morrison also gives us reason not to endorse the rest of Paul's negative judgments. His remark that Sethe has "two feet not four" clearly links his assessment with schoolteacher's, and that link affects our response to each one's judgment. On the one hand, Paul D's seeing Sethe's action in the same terms as schoolteacher does reminds us of the horror of the physical description of what schoolteacher saw. But on the other, if Paul D adopts schoolteacher's terms, his assessment clearly cannot be entirely right. Again, Morrison's technique leads us to rule out certain ethical responses—schoolteacher's racist one, Sethe's own heroic one—without leading us to a clear position.

Connections

If the three tellings do not themselves position us clearly, perhaps the connections between these tellings and other parts of the novel will. I would like to look at the two most significant connections, both of which give greater weight to Sethe's perspective on her choice without finally indicating that Morrison endorses that perspective. Consider, first, the retrospective light cast by Sethe's account to Beloved about what happened when she overheard one of schoolteacher's lessons:

> This is the first time I'm telling it and I'm telling it to you because it might help explain something to you although I know you don't need me to do it. To tell it or

> even think over it. You don't have to listen either, if you don't want to. But I couldn't help listening to what I heard that day. He was talking to his pupils and I heard him say, "Which one are you doing?" And one the boys said, "Sethe." That's when I stopped because I heard my name, and then I took a few steps to where I could see what they was doing. Schoolteacher was standing over one of them with one hand behind his back. He licked a forefinger a couple of times and turned a few pages. Slow. I was about to turn around and keep on my way to where the muslin was, when I heard him say, "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up." I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back. When I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly. One of the dogs was licking out a pan in the yard. I got to the grape arbor fast enough, but I didn't have the muslin. Flies settled all over your face, rubbing their hands. My head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp. I never told Halle or nobody. (193)

The retrospective light of this passage illuminates Sethe's choice in the following ways: (1) It explains why the sight of schoolteacher at 124 Bluestone Rd. makes Sethe feel as if hummingbirds are sticking their "needle beaks" in her scalp. (2) In so doing, it provides further motivation for her instinctive response; having tasted freedom for herself and her children, how can she desire anything other than to put them all somewhere safe? (3) It shows how deeply racist schoolteacher's response to Sethe's rough choice is: her horrible actions do not cause him to think of her as a horse or a hound, but those terms provide the only way in which he can process the scene he witnesses. For these reasons, the retrospective light shines most brightly and most favorably on Sethe's telling. I will discuss the significance of this effect after looking at the second connection.

This connection involves Sethe and Paul D. In the very first chapter of the novel, Sethe tells Paul about how she came to get the "tree" on her back.

> "Men don't know nothing much," said Paul D, tucking his pouch back into his vest pocket, "but they do know a suckling can't be away from its mother for long."
>
> "Then they know what it's like to send your children off when your breasts are full."
>
> "We was talking 'bout a tree, Sethe."
>
> "After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. [. . .] Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."
>
> "They used cowhide on you?"
>
> "And they took my milk."
>
> "They beat you and you was pregnant."
>
> "And they took my milk!" (16-17)

Paul D's failure to understand that Sethe felt more violated by the white men's taking her milk than by their whipping her back shows that he does not understand what motherhood means to Sethe. His judgment that her "love is

too thick" can be seen as a similar failure of understanding. Although Paul D knows the evils of slavery, he does not know what it is like to be both parent and slave, let alone both mother and slave. Reading Paul D's judgment of Sethe's choice in light of this earlier scene, we see that Morrison wants us to suspect his quick and sure negative response. Paul D is once again thinking like a man without children rather than like a mother.[7]

Since each connection works in its own way to support Sethe's narrative, we may be inclined to conclude that the weight of evidence now suggests that Morrison is directing us to endorse Sethe's view of her actions. But since neither connection actually addresses the recalcitrance Sethe's narrative encounters—the horror of child murder, the lack of true safety in her life—the better conclusion is that Morrison assumes that her harder task will be to maintain sympathy for Sethe once the events of August 1855 are revealed.

Consequences

In sum, I have been arguing that Morrison clearly designates some positions that we ought not occupy—Sethe deserves Paul D's harsh judgment; Sethe's own account should be endorsed—without positively establishing her own ethical assessment. As we have seen in the epigraph, Morrison incorporates this attitude into the narrative through the character of the wise Baby Suggs, a source of knowledge and wisdom throughout the novel: she is finally unable either to approve or condemn Sethe's choice. Unlike Baby Suggs, however, the responsible audience member can not simply withdraw from the ethical demands of the narrative and give his or her days over to the contemplation of color. Instead, we need to deal with the way Morrison requires us to recognize that Sethe's choice is somehow beyond the reach of standard ethical judgment—an action at once instinctive and unnatural, motivated by love but destructive to life. Consequently, the ethically irresponsible thing to do is to resolve the problem by reaching a clear and fixed judgment of Sethe's action. If other flesh and blood readers are at all like me, they are likely to find their judgments of Sethe fluctuating—sometimes the horror of the murder will dominate our consciousness, while at others Sethe's desperation, motivation, and purpose will make her choice seem, if not fully defensible, at least comprehensible.

This inability to fix a position on the central action complicates our relation to Sethe as the central actor without disrupting our sympathy for her. Sethe becomes a character who was once pushed beyond the limits of human endurance and reacted to that pushing in this extraordinary way. Consequently, we turn our judgment on the institution that pushed her beyond the limits: slavery. It is of course easy to say that slavery is evil, but it's another thing for readers in the late twentieth century—especially white readers—to feel the force of that statement, to comprehend the effects of

slavery on individual human lives. Morrison's treatment of Sethe's rough choice moves readers toward such comprehension: in the space where we wrestle with the ethical dilemma presented by Sethe's choice, we must imaginatively engage with Sethe's instinctive decision that, when faced with the prospect of slavery, loving her children means murdering them. Such engagement transforms slavery from an abstract evil to a palpable one. Such engagement is also crucial to Morrison's larger purpose of challenging her audience to come to terms with slavery's continuing effects on the United States.[8]

At the level of author-audience communication, Morrison's unusual treatment of Sethe's choice also creates an unusual ethical relationship with her audience. The treatment is simultaneously a challenge and a compliment. She challenges us to have the negative capability to refrain from any irritable reaching after ethical closure about Sethe's rough choice, even as that challenge implies her faith that we will be equal to the task. Morrison's treatment retains the basic reciprocal relation between author and audience that underlies the ethical dimension of their communication, but it gives a new twist to that reciprocity. By limiting her guidance, Morrison gives up some authorial responsibility and transfers it to the audience. By accepting that responsibility—and attending to the parameters within which Morrison asks us to exercise it—we have a more difficult and demanding but also richer reading experience. By guiding us less, Morrison gives us more. By exercising the responsibility Morrison transfers to us, we get more out of what she offers. For this flesh and blood reader, this ethical relationship is a key reason *Beloved* is one of the most unsettling and most rewarding narratives I have ever read.

Notes

[1] In the eleven years since its publication, *Beloved* has attracted a great deal of critical attention, becoming the subject of over two hundred books and articles, yet no one, to my knowledge, has directly addressed the ethics of Sethe's choice. The existing criticism is especially strong on the novel's many thematic components from history and memory to motherhood and identity as well as on its relation to previous American narratives and its mingling of Western and African cultural values. For a sample of this work, see Christian, Handley (on Western and African culture), Armstrong, Moreland, Travis (on relation to previous traditions), Hirsch, Wilt, Wyatt (on motherhood and its related issues), and Hartman and Moglen (on history and memory). For essays that focus on issues of narrative theory and technique, see Homans, Rimmon-Kenan, and Phelan.

[2] For further discussion of this approach, see my *Narrative as Rhetoric,* especially the Introduction.

[3] The ethical turn in literary studies over the past decade or so is a phenomenon that should be seen in relation to other, larger developments in the institution. The ethical turn, I believe, is part of the general reaction against the formalism of Yale-school deconstruction in the wake of the revelations of Paul de

Man's wartime writings; it is also compatible with, though distinguishable from, the continuing power of feminist criticism and theory and the rising influence of African-American, multicultural, and queer criticism and theory, all of which ground themselves in sets of ethico-political commitments. The ethical turn in narrative studies is also part of a growing attention to the uses of narrative across the disciplines and in "everyday life."

From this perspective, we can see J. Hillis Miller's work on ethics as an effort to address the connection between the formal concerns of Yale deconstruction and the turn toward ethics. That ethics becomes, for Miller, another way of doing deconstruction is testimony to both the power and limits of deconstruction's conception of language as undecidable. We can also see Martha Nussbaum's philosophical investigation into narrative's capacity to offer thick descriptions of moral problems and moral reasoning as a rich instance of interdisciplinary interest in narrative. For other important work, see Harpham, the recent issue of *PMLA* devoted to ethical criticism, and of course the other essays in this special issue.

[4] For other allusions, see pages 12, 14, 15, 19, 37, 38, 42, 45, 70, 73, 96.

[5] I don't mean to suggest that Morrison never exposes the limits of some values and beliefs held by the main characters. For example, she asks us to recognize both the immaturity of Denver's view of Paul D as an unwelcome intruder and the good reasons why she clings so strongly to that view.

[6] "Representative" in the sense that it provides an appropriate focus for my discussion of the ethical dimension of the first telling, but not "representative" in the sense that all sections of the telling work the way this one does.

[7] There is one more very suggestive consequence of following the connections between Schoolteacher's lesson and his and Paul D's judgment of Sethe. These connections, along with a few other moments in the text, suggest that Morrison wants to question the distinction—or at least to question the usual assumed hierarchy of the distinction—at the heart of schoolteacher's lesson, that between the human and the animal. The inversion of the hierarchy is, of course, very much a part of the passage describing the lesson: Sethe has a kind of self-consciousness that we don't usually attribute to animals, whereas Schoolteacher has lost all sense of what we usually think of as humanity in his assumptions about Sethe as subhuman. But Morrison goes further than that in the way in which the distinction operates in the larger narrative. First, as A. S. Byatt points out in her review of the novel, Sethe's giving birth to Denver depends on her going on all fours, on her acting as if she has four legs not two. Indeed, the symbolic forest that springs up between Sethe and Paul D after he renders his judgment may very well be the forest through which Sethe crawled on the night of her flight from Sweet Home, the night before Denver was born. Moreover, if Paul D's comment applies to Sethe's murder of Beloved, it also applies to Sethe's most unambiguous demonstration of motherly love and devotion.

Paul D's remark also is complicated by his own past actions that might suggest that he has four legs not two, particularly his finding sexual release by rutting with cows. Schoolteacher's lesson, Morrison's suggestions about inverting the usual hierarchies, Paul D's comment to Sethe about how many legs she has, the Sweet Home men's sexual practices: all these elements of the narrative suggest that Morrison is very much interested in questioning the boundaries of the human, very much trying to suggest that the lines between the human and the animal are

not as clear and clean as some one such as Schoolteacher would like his pupils to believe.

[8] For a discussion of how Morrison incorporates this challenge into the ending of the novel, see my "Toward a Rhetorical Readers Response Criticism."

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