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AP English

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May 5, 2017

### Personhood in *Beloved*

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, death of one's physical body is not permanent, and the line between life and death is blurred by several people – such as the eponymous Beloved – who cross that line in an unnatural way. There is another kind of death in *Beloved*, however, that is less fluid: death of the soul and the erasure of personhood. This sort of soul death is far more permanent than the destruction of one's corporeal form. The level of dehumanization present in this work is brought out mainly by slavery, and the racist views that support it. By illuminating the immutability and severity of soul death, Morrison reveals the reasoning behind Sethe's decision to attempt to kill her four children and adds to the negative characterization of slavery in the novel. In doing so, she makes the full horrors of slavery easier to grasp.

People who linger after death in the form of ghosts are commonplace in Morrison's postbellum America. Baby Suggs says that “not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief” (Morrison 6). Everyone knows someone who died in the war, or before it during slavery. When Stamp Paid comes by 124 (Sethe's house) to check up on Sethe and Denver, he hears the “roaring” of “the black and angry dead” around the house (Morrison 213, 234); so many souls gone but come back that it “exhaust[s]” him, so many that he cannot bring himself to knock on the door and go in, as he had been free to do before (Morrison 213). By living in a house “peopled by the living activity of the dead,” Denver is accustomed to living

among dead people (Morrison 35).

Beloved is one such person who returns to the world from death. Even before Beloved appears in a physical body, she is present. When Paul D first enters 124, “a pool of red and undulating light” locks him in place, clearly brought upon by the spirit of the ‘crawling-already? baby’ in the house (Morrison 10). Also, Denver one day sees “a white dress” kneeling alongside her mother, with its sleeve forming a “tender embrace” with her mother (Morrison 35). The baby ghost, on another occasion, in her anger “slammed” Here Boy, Sethe’s dog, into the wall so hard that “he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue” (Morrison 14). The ghost shatters mirrors, puts hands in a cake, and makes the entire house tremble (Morrison 3, 21). Denver has grown up knowing that this is the ghost of her sister, and has a certain fondness for its presence.

In addition to the literal return of people from death back to life, *Beloved* features others who symbolically are dead or seem dead but then come back to life. When Sethe is fleeing Sweet Home (the plantation on which she worked) to go to free Ohio, she is in such bad physical condition that she is shocked to learn of her continued existence as she comes out of “a sleep she thought was death” (Morrison 97). Still pregnant with Denver, when she wakes up she feels her stomach, noticing nothing. Sethe determines that “the baby was dead” (Morrison 97). Perhaps Denver truly died, but the answer is uncertain. However, what is certain is that once Sethe gains sight of the free soil of Ohio and of the river that will bear her and her child to safety, her water breaks, signaling that her child is “not dead in the least” (Morrison 98).

The impermanence of life and death is emphasized symbolically in Paul D’s experiences in the chain gang in Georgia. In their manual labor, Paul D and the rest of the men beat the earth

into submission, transforming hard rock into loose gravel. As they strike the ground they also strike right at Life and Death personified. They “smash” the head of Death, and “maimed, mutilated, even buried” Life (Morrison 128). Though the chain gang beats them “all day every day” until it appears that Life has left them, Life does not remain absent for long (Morrison 129). When Life comes back, it is with such force that trees “drooped under her weight,” “dogs laid their ears down,” and the men are forced to adopt a “slow drag” (Morrison 129). No matter how much effort the men put into destroying Life, she returns, renewed and powerful, just like Beloved and others. Both people and forces of nature which are killed physically return to life in *Beloved*. The story for those whose souls are killed is different.

Possession is the most important issue in *Beloved*, namely, the possession of black flesh by slave-owners. Slavery is the ultimate denial of personhood, as the inalienable freedoms and rights we should possess simply by virtue of being alive are rejected. Through slavery, one’s soul may die. The importance of possession is held through the repeated use of the word *mine*. When Stamp Paid goes up to 124 to speak with Sethe and hears all the voices that possess the house, the only word that can be discerned out of the clamor is “mine” (Morrison 203). Out of all the voices of different periods, ages, and backgrounds, *mine* stands out. In the second part of the novel there are several successive chapters written from the consciousness of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. Each of those streams begins with a claim of possession. To Sethe, “Beloved, she my daughter” (Morrison 236). To Denver, “Beloved is my sister” (Morrison 242). To Beloved, Sethe “is mine” (Morrison 248). As the individual minds of the occupants of 124 break apart and meld together through their continued coexistence, the narrator of the part becomes fluid and joint. In two places the mantra “you are mine” is repeated in triplicate, showing the equal

perspectives of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved (Morrison 255, 256). This importance of possession forms one of the reasons that Sethe wants to get her and her children across into Ohio. At Sweet Home, her children are not “mine to love” (Morrison 190). They are the property of the Garners and then of schoolteacher, to be bought and sold at their leisure to the highest bidder. The children are theirs, and not hers. Sethe can no more control her children’s fates in the South than she can control the weather. Sethe, her children, and all the other slaves are dehumanized.

Throughout the novel, memories of the instruments used to dehumanize the slaves haunt Sethe. She sometimes has “nothing...in her mind” when it hits her: memories of Sweet Home, where she and her children had been enslaved under schoolteacher, who had her make ink from “cherry gum and oak bark” (Morrison 6). The significance of the ink is not initially clear to the reader. Of all the negative aspects of slavery, such as forced labor, the theft of one’s children, the denial of control over one’s body, how does ink fit into the picture? Sethe brings up the ink both when intentionally and unintentionally recounting Sweet Home (Morrison 27, 116). When recalling the behavior of schoolteacher, Sethe comments that “he liked the ink I made” before noting the beating and suffering she and the other slaves endured at his hand (Morrison 44). Clearly, the ink is significant, but the reader does not know why.

The importance of the ink is illuminated slowly. The first glimpse of its true nature is revealed when Sethe tells her life story to Denver. Sethe says that schoolteacher “at night ... sat down to write in his book” about the slaves at Sweet Home (Morrison 44). She says that they did not know the contents of his journal at the time, but in retrospect she believes that the contents of that book and the questions that schoolteacher asked the slaves to gain information to transcribe into the book are what caused Sixo, one of her fellow slaves at Sweet Home, to get

“tore up” (Morrison 44). Now the reader knows that the ink is being used to write. Still it is uncertain exactly what is being written, but one can tell that it is something powerfully sinister, more deleterious than any physical punishment a slave-owner can exact on their property.

By the time that it is finally revealed what the ink is being used to write down, the gritty details of what Sethe did to try to kill her children have been described. One day while at Sweet Home Sethe overhears schoolteacher leading his nephews through an academic exercise. They are tasked with creating charts of the “characteristics” of the slaves at Sweet Home (specifically Sethe’s) based on whether the trait is an animal or a human one (Morrison 228). The realization that schoolteacher and the nephews literally view her and her fellow slaves as animals shakes her to her core. She “commence[s] to walk backward” from the door upon hearing them speak (Morrison 228). She does not have initial thoughts as it is too shocking for her to consciously evaluate at the moment. No thought is put into her immediate instinctual response to back away, and she only stops when she “bump[s] up against a tree” (Morrison 228). She has a physical reaction to this discovery: her “head itche[s] like the devil” (Morrison 228). For the rest of the day, she uncontrollably and unconsciously itches her scalp. Perhaps the tic is a coping mechanism that Sethe uses because she has no other way to express herself and the emotions running through that her head. She cannot stop scratching. She knows that what she has heard is too powerful to tell anyone else, and so she does not tell anyone until nearly twenty years later when she reveals her secret to Denver and Beloved.

Twenty years after the fact, Sethe remains haunted by the ink schoolteacher used. Schoolteacher “couldn’t have done it if [Sethe] hadn’t made the ink” (Morrison 320). Sethe believes that he would not have been able to liken Sethe and her children to animals had he not

had the ink. An unwilling party to an unforgivable transgression, Sethe cannot forgive herself. Anything to do with the denial of black personhood is dark for her; anything to do with the denial of her children's personhood is worse. Indeed, the denial of personhood inherent in slavery itself is so severe that Sethe chooses "any life but not that one" for her and her children (Morrison 50). The hardships that Sethe's family endures simply do not matter when compared to the dehumanization of slavery. Merely the fact that their life after the death of her daughter is "not that other one" makes it a better life (Morrison 51). Any other form of life in which black folk would have the dignity of autonomy is worth illegally escaping slavery. She would not allow her children to "live under schoolteacher" and be dehumanized through his exercises (Morrison 192). She prefers death.

Truly, death is better than life under slavery, according to Sethe. Under slavery, the slaves' inherent and obvious value as humans is denied, and their freedom restricted. Simply put, their souls are not safe. They could be convinced that they are less than human, and less than animals even. They could stop believing in their personhood and the value that entails, in the things that separate people from beasts. By trying to kill her children, Sethe attempts to put her "babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison 193). Safe not from physical harm, as they are arguably getting more physical harm by being bashed against the walls of a shed than they would by being enslaved, but safe from dehumanization. Sethe knows slavery, and she refuses to allow her children to return to it. That someone could "list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper" is unallowable (Morrison 296).

One specific example of someone's humanity being completely destroyed is Halle, Sethe's husband. Upon seeing Sethe being used like an animal by schoolteacher and his

nephews, chained down, milk stolen, brutally whipped, with him unable to do anything to help, Halle becomes like an animal too. He no longer speaks, “smear[s]” butter and clabber all over his face”, and goes as “flat-eyed as a fish” (Morrison 83, 265). His soul is gone, never seen again. When Paul D remembers Halle, and the state in which he was when they last saw each other (that is, the state without his personhood), he says that to Halle, “butter and clabber was no life or reason to live it” (Morrison 147). Witnessing what becomes of Halle, the reader is better able to understand why Baby Suggs can neither “approve nor condemn Sethe's rough choice” of Sethe's own child's murder (180).

In sharp contrast to the hordes of people who come back from the physical dead (Beloved, millions of slaves and slave-owners' ghosts, Life), there is only one person who returns from the dehumanized: Paul D. Enslaved and without freedom, he is “less than a chicken sitting in the sun” as it could choose its own fate and go where it pleases (Morrison 86). The chickens are “allowed to be and stay” what they are, and define themselves, but the people who are in chains are not afforded that most basic of liberties (Morrison 86). Between the animals and the slaves, the animals are “king” (Morrison 86). Schoolteacher removes Paul D's personhood by putting a bit in his mouth and a collar around his neck so he can neither speak nor run away. Schoolteacher makes Paul D realize that without freedom, he is less than an animal. The bit put a “wildness” into Paul D's eyes and into anyone else's eyes who wears it, a wildness that Sethe has never seen removed before Paul D. (Morrison 84). Paul D is the only one who “knows a way to take [the wildness] out” and reclaim his personhood for himself (Morrison 84), but the cost is high (only ever loving things a little).

Whereas most of *Beloved* is written from the perspective of black people, there are a few

sections written from the perspective of whites. The main part written in this way is the scene in which schoolteacher, his nephews, and the sheriff come to 124 to retrieve Sethe and her children. This point of view shows first hand the dehumanizing results of slavery from the position of the ones higher up the hierarchy. When he sees a “nigger,” schoolteacher compares him to a “bull ... snake ... bear [or] cat” and not to a human (Morrison 174-175). While trying to teach his nephews how to treat the slaves, schoolteacher compares them to animals, even when such analogies simply are nonsensical. For example, he asks his nephew to consider what would happen “if you beat [your horse] beyond the point of education” in an attempt to persuade him to treat the slaves slightly more gently (Morrison 176). Of course, horses do not become educated or learn in the way that schoolteacher suggests. Schoolteacher seems to be implicitly acknowledging that slaves have a high level of reason or intelligence, but his racism is so great that he cannot bring himself to come to the logical conclusion: that they should be free and treated with dignity equal to what is afforded to white people. Rather, his hate is so strong that he cannot consciously fathom slaves as being anything but animals, despite the fact that by using his own words these views makes no sense.

When he sees Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs chopping wood and gardening, he thinks of them as “crazy” despite the fact that they are doing completely normal tasks (Morrison 175). It is not specifically what Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs are doing that make them crazy in the eyes of schoolteacher, but rather than they are black and free, and working on matters of their own choice which leads him to call them crazy. Schoolteacher and his associates take typical tasks such as maintenance and view them through a filter such that whenever a black person does what would otherwise be a normal task, it becomes abnormal. The sort of dehumanization that

schoolteacher utilizes here is more subtle than direct comparisons to animals. However, by stratifying and describing actions done by members of one race as typical and actions done by another as atypical, schoolteacher marginalizes that other race. He depersonalizes all blacks into one homogeneous race who all must have the same influences and motivations, none of which are apparently rational.

Schoolteacher and his nephews do seem to unconsciously acknowledge the humanity of Sethe and her children, oddly enough. After seeing Sethe try to kill Buglar, Howard, and Denver, and succeed in killing the ‘crawling-already? baby,’ the men are rattled. One of the nephews is visibly “shaking” at the sight, though he does not seem to realize it (Morrison 176). This action seems to indicate that racism, and slavery, is an unnatural perversion of the human condition. Slave-owners know at their core that slaves are people who deserve the full range of freedoms that everyone else has, but they suppress their natural emotions with illogic and cruelty. Morrison makes it clear that the “jungle whitefolks planted” in the slaves to convince them that they were less than human did not remain in the black people, but grew and spread to white people to make them “bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be” (Morrison 234). The nephew is so emotionally shaken that he cannot consciously evaluate what Sethe has just done, as he asks, “what she go and do that for?” multiple times in disbelief (Morrison 177). Though the nephew does not consciously know what to think, his body, removed from thought, immediately knows the appropriate reaction.

Schoolteacher is emotionally affected by what he has seen as well. He spits on the ground as he leaves the woodshed in which the ‘crawling-already? baby’ has been killed, expressing his disgust (Morrison 177). In the short period of time after he sees the event, he gets

sick of being where he is. As he leads his nephews away back from the shed, he thinks that he has seen “enough nigger eyes” (Morrison 177). What he has just witnessed is so revolting to him, so uncomfortable to anyone who had the misfortune of seeing it, that he cannot stand all the seeing eyes of the people around him. He needs some time alone to privately process what he has witnessed. The inquisitive eyes of those around him prevent him from doing so. This response seems to suggest once again that unconsciously he accepts blacks as people. If there were cattle around that were looking at him, it seems unlikely that schoolteacher would have such a reaction against being seen.

The inherent personhood of each human is denied in slavery. This denial constitutes a death of the soul more severe and more permanent than a mere death of one’s body. Through describing the specific ways that dehumanization can harm an individual’s conception of self worth and humanity, as well as examining some of the ways that such a dehumanization can be enacted on the part of the abuser, Toni Morrison informs the reader of why Sethe chooses to do the unthinkable and attempt to kill her children in *Beloved*. In the contest between death or the loss of one’s personhood, death is shown to be the lesser of two evils.

Work Cited

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Random House, 2004. Print