

ANALYSIS

Beloved (1987)

Toni Morrison

(1931-)

“I wanted to show the reader what slavery *felt* like, rather than how it looked.”

Toni Morrison (1993)
The Paris Review Interviews II
(Picador 2007) 375

“Professor Nellie McKay recently reminded me that African-American women during the era of slavery often killed their offspring in order to forestall their enslavement.”

Hortense J. Spillers
“A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love”
Feminist Studies 9.2
(Summer 1983) n.19

“The subject of Toni Morrison’s new novel, *Beloved*, is slavery, and the book staggers under the terror of its material—as so much holocaust writing does and must. Morrison’s other novels teem with people, but in *Beloved* half the important characters are dead in the novel’s present, 1873. Though they appear in memory, they have no future. Slavery, says one character, ‘ain’t a battle; it’s a rout’—with hardly any of what one could confidently call survivors. The mood is woe, depression, horror, a sense of unbearable loss. Still, those who remain must exorcise the deadly past from their hearts or die themselves; *Beloved* is the tale of such an exorcism.

In complex narrative loops, *Beloved* circles around and hints at the different fates of a group of slaves who once lived on a plantation in Kentucky, ‘Sweet Home’—of course neither ‘sweet’ nor ‘home’: an old woman called Baby Suggs, her son Halle, Paul A., Paul D., Paul F., Sixo, and one young woman among them, Sethe. (Here as everywhere in the novel names raise baleful questions. Slaves have a tragically tenuous hold on names, and it is only in their final destinies that the three Pauls are allowed separate lives.)

Halle strikes a bargain with his master to sell his few free hours and use the money to buy his mother’s freedom. Baby Suggs wonders why he bothers. What can a crippled old woman do with freedom? But when she stands on the northern side of the Ohio River and walks through the streets of Cincinnati, ‘she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn’t; that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in the world.’

Back at Sweet Home the decent master dies. (In slavery, a good master is merely a chance episode, any feeling of autonomy is merely a fool’s illusion.) The new boss, ‘Schoolteacher,’ beats his slaves and measures them with rulers, keeping pseudo-scholarly lists of their ‘human and animal characteristics.’ He demonstrates that any time the whites want to, they can knock you into the middle of next week, or back into the dependency of childhood. But Sethe now has three babies by the generous-spirited Halle, and the idea that she might never see them grow (like Baby Suggs’s, who saw seven of her children sold), or that they will grow only into Schoolteacher’s eternal children, strengthens her resolve to join the Sweet Home slaves who plan to run, taking a ‘train’ north.

Paul F. is long gone—sold, who knows where. During the escape, Paul A. gets caught and hanged. Sixo gets caught and burned alive. Paul D. gets caught and sold in chains with a bit in his mouth. Sethe manages to get her three children on the train, but is caught herself, assaulted, beaten. Halle fails to appear at their rendezvous—lost, mysteriously lost, and never to be found again. Sethe runs anyway, because she can’t forget that hungry baby who’s gone on ahead, and because a new one is waiting to be born.

Half dead, and saved only by the help of a young white girl, trash almost as exiled as herself, Sethe gives birth to her baby girl, Denver, on the banks of the Ohio and manages to get them both across and truly home, to Baby Suggs's door. Told flat, the plot of *Beloved* is the stuff of melodrama, recalling *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But Morrison doesn't really *tell* these incidents. Bits and pieces of them leak out between the closed eyelids of her characters, or between their clenched fingers. She twists and tortures and fractures events until they are little slivers that cut. She moves the lurid material of melodrama into the middle of her people, where it gets sifted and sorted, lived and relived, until it acquires the enlarging outlines of myth and trauma, dream and obsession.

In fact, the intense past hardly manages to emerge at all. It is repressed, just as the facts of slavery are. Instead, in the foreground of the novel, Morrison places a few lonely minds in torment: Sethe, Denver, Paul D. All the drama of the past desire and escape has fled to the margins of their consciousness, while Morrison's survivors are living in one extended moment of grief. Slowly, painfully, we learn that in order to keep Schoolteacher from recapturing her children, Sethe tried to kill them all, succeeding with the third, a baby girl Morrison leaves nameless. The act lies at the center of the book: incontrovertible, enormous. Sethe explains that she killed the baby because 'if I hadn't killed her she would have died.' Morrison makes us believe the logic down to the ground.

By 1873, eighteen years after Sethe's fatal act of resistance, slavery is technically over, whether or not the former slaves feel finished with it. Sethe's eldest two boys have run off, perhaps overfull of the mother love that almost killed them as children. Baby Suggs's house has become the entire world to Sethe and Denver—now eighteen. They live there ostracized, proud and alone—except for the active ghost of the murdered two-year-old.

This awkward spirit shakes the furniture, puts tiny handprints on the cakes, shatters mirrors, while Sethe and Denver live stolidly in the chaos, emotionally frozen. Into this landscape of regret walks Paul D., one of the dear lost comrades from Sweet Home. He has been tramping for these eighteen years, and now comes to rest on Sethe's front porch. Innocent of the secret of the baby's death, he seems to exorcise her ghost with nothing much more than his warm presence. As it turns out, she is not that easy to dismiss. The bulk of the novel dwells on the ghost's desperate return as a grown woman who calls herself 'Beloved,' the one word she has found on her tombstone.

At first, *Beloved* seems benign in her new avatar, and Sethe is ecstatic to have her daughter back. But gradually, the strange visitor in elegant clothes and mysteriously unscuffed shoes turns into a fearsome figure, seducing Paul D. in order to drag him into wrong and send him packing, eating all the best food until Sethe and Denver begin to starve, ruling the demented household. The whole center of the novel is a projection of Sethe's longing; *Beloved* is a snare to catch her anguished, hungry mother's heart and keep her in the prison of guilt forever. She is also memory, the return of the dreadful past. In her, the breathtaking horror of the breakup of Sweet Home lives, sucking up all the air.

And so Toni Morrison has written a novel that's airless. How could this happen to a writer this skillful, working with material this full and important? In the reading, the novel's accomplishments seem driven to the periphery by Morrison's key decision to be literal about her metaphor, to make the dead baby a character whose flesh-and-bone existence takes up a great deal of narrative space. Even Sethe and Denver complain at times about the irritating presence of their ghost. And when she returns as a woman, she is a zombie, animated by abstract ideas. Later those who loved her 'realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all.'

Symbolic thinking is one thing, magical thinking quite another. Morrison blurs the distinction in *Beloved*, stripping the real magic of its potency and the symbols of their poetry. Her undigested insistence on the magical keeps bringing this often beautiful novel to the earth. Morrison's last two strange and original books, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, had some of this unconvincing reliance on the supernatural, too. By contrast, *The Bluest Eye*, her first, was bitten and dry-eyed; the little girl in that novel who thinks she can get blue eyes by magic sinks into the psychosis of wishing. Morrison's best magic was in *Sula*, the

novel where it is most elusive, making no more solid a claim for the Unseen than the human spiritual power to move mountains.

This isn't to say ghosts can't or shouldn't be the stuff of fiction. The present generation of South American gothicists often convince us of the living power of ghosts in the worlds they describe. And the literature of disaster is haunted by the noisy dead, clamoring to be remembered as active presences, not cut off from a continuing story. Morrison is working in these traditions when she tries to animate the resistant weight of the slave experience by pouring on magic, lurid visions, fantasies of reconciliation. And why not? In one way, she comes by her magic honestly: It is the lore of the folk she loves, a visionary inheritance that makes her people superior to those—black or white—who don't have any talent for noticing the unseen. She wants to show how the slave lives on, raising havoc, and to give Sethe, her treasured heroine, a chance to fight it out with the demon of grief. If *Beloved* is a drag on the narrative, a soul mixed with a great deal of dross, well so be it, Morrison seems to say. When strong, loving women would rather kill their babies than see them hauled back to slavery, the damage to every black who inherits that moment is a literal damage and no metaphor. The novel is meant to give grief body, to make it palpable.

But I suspect Morrison knows she's in some trouble here, since she harps so on the presence of *Beloved*, sometimes neglecting the mental life of her other characters. Their vitality is sacrificed to the inert ghost until the very end—a structure that makes thematic sense but leaves the novel hollow in the middle. *Beloved* is, of course, what's heavy in their hearts, but can the ghost of a tragically murdered two-year-old bear this weight of meaning? No matter how she kicks and screams, the ghost is too light to symbolize the static fact of her own death. She is a distraction from those in the flesh, who must bear the pain of a dead child's absence. She is dead, which is the only arresting thing about her, and Morrison's prose goes dead when it concerns her.

If *Beloved* fails in its ambitions, it is still a novel by Toni Morrison, still therefore full of beautiful prose, dialogue as rhythmically satisfying as music, delicious characters with names like Grandma Baby and Stamp Paid, and the scenes so clearly etched they're like hallucinations. Morrison is one of the great, serious writers we have. Who else tries to do what Dickens did: create wild, flamboyant, abstractly symbolic characters who are at the same time not grotesque but sweetly alive, full of deep feeling? Usually in contemporary fiction, the grotesque is mixed with irony or zaniness, not with passion and romance. Morrison rejects irony, a choice that immediately sets her apart. Like Alice Walker (there are several small, friendly allusions to *The Color Purple* in *Beloved*), she wants to tend the imagination, search for an expansion of the possible, nurture a spiritual richness in the black tradition even after three hundred years in the white desert.

From book to book, Morrison's larger project grows clear. First, she insists that every character beat the weight of responsibility for his or her own life. After she's measured out each one's private pain, she adds on to that the shared burden of what the white did. Then, at last, she tries to find the place where her stories can lighten her reader's load, lift them up from their own and others' guilt, carry them to glory.... *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, and now *Beloved*, have writings as beautiful as [the ending of *Sula*], but they are less in control of that delicate turn from fact to wish.

Even at her best, Morrison's techniques are risky, and sometimes, in *Beloved*, she loses her gamble. Slavery resists her impulse toward the grand summation of romance. The novel revolves and searches, searches and revolves, never getting any closer to these people numbed by their overwhelming grief. *Why* could they not save those they loved? Nothing moves here; everything is static and in pieces. The fragmentary, the unresolvable are in order in a story about slavery. When Morrison embraces this hideous fact, the book is dire and powerful: Halle is never found. Baby Suggs never reassembles her scattered children, whose names and faces are now those of strangers. Sethe has collapsed inside, unable to bear what has happened to them all.

Still, for Morrison, it is the romance and not the fractured narrative of modernism [Postmodernism] that is the vehicle of her greatest feeling for her people. Though in their sorrow they resist her, she keeps inviting them to rise up on wings. She can't bear for them to be lost, finished, routed. The romantic in her longs to fuse what is broken, to give us something framed, at least one polychromatic image from above.

When this works, it's glorious. And even when it doesn't, it's a magnificent intention. But there are moments in Morrison's recent novels when the brilliant, rich, and evocative image seems a stylistic tic, a shortcut to intensity. Romance can be a temptation. At the end of *Beloved* Morrison joins Sethe and Paul D. together for good. This happy union is a device laid on them from without by a solicitous author. It *should* be possible—why should pain breed only more pain?—but Morrison doesn't manage to maintain a necessary tension between what she knows and what she desires. She wishes too hard. Something in the novel goes slack.

Because Morrison is always a tiger storyteller, she struggles against her novel's tendency to be at war with itself. She keeps writing gorgeous scenes, inventing characters so compelling and clear they carry us with them, back into a novel that seems determined to expel us. The ending in particular pushes *Beloved* beyond where it seemed capable of going... It is a brave and radical project to center a novel on a dead child ignored by history, cruelly forgotten along with so much else that happened to black people in slavery. A slave baby murdered by its own mother is 'not a story to pass on.'

Even the slave who knows Sethe's reasons finds them hard to accept. Paul D. is so horrified when he finally learns about her crime that he leaves her for a time, telling her she has two legs not four. It is beastly to kill a baby, and yet Sethe asks, who was the beast? To keep *Beloved* out of the hands of an owner who would see her only as an animal, Sethe would rather be wild herself, do her own subduing of the human spirit, if killed it must be. As always in the last pages of her novels, Morrison gathers herself together and sings here of those who didn't even leave their names, who died before they had the chance to become the sort of people about whom you could tell real stories....

Morrison is great even in pieces, and worth waiting for, however long it takes. This novel deserves to be read as much for what it cannot say as for what it can. It is a book of revelations about slavery, and its seriousness insures that it is just a matter of time before Morrison shakes that brilliant kaleidoscope of hers again and the story of pain, endurance, poetry and power she is born to tell comes out right.

*

I would like to briefly note a few second thoughts, prompted by some subsequent criticism of *Beloved*. Barbara Christian has celebrated—and named differently—the very trait that I criticized in 1987, the vacuum, the absence, at the novel's core. She calls this absence a taboo, which arises from the trauma of slavery, a gap in history, a blank in consciousness. I criticized Morrison for writing a clunky ghost, but maybe the one taking that ghost too literally was myself. The ghost is a figment with the power to stop the action and contaminate the air. She is a projection of grief. [Postmodernists do not believe in an afterlife] We never get half a chance to love *Beloved*, and her name becomes a pure and bitter irony, an irony which tempers every bit of Morrison's romanticism." [March 1993]

Ann Snitow
The Village Voice Literary Supplement
(September 1987, 1993)

"Among the score of American novels of last year that I read, *the book is Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Not without hue and cry: there was Stanley Crouch's very sour review in *The New Republic*, which itself causes a storm, and I have had some heated conversations about it with my colleague, Charles Johnson... *Beloved* was written in the palace of Art, its ways with history are like those of *Nostramo* or Ford's *Fifth Queen* series, its verbal texture is as rich as that of *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Morrison is thereby heir to more problems than she perhaps knows. No matter. This is a major book....

About as far back as the novel's memory goes, a slave named Halle got permission from his owner to work for pay on Sundays so that, years later, after Halle had married Sethe, he could buy freedom for his mother, Baby Suggs. With the help of the whites who own the house, Baby Suggs had come to live at 124—so that 124 is where Halle and Sethe will come after they escape, except that they are separated and Sethe arrives alone.... Sethe and Denver are the central characters, Baby Suggs is the most memorable minor character since one of Faulkner's, Howard and Buglar never reappear, and the baby with the venom 'is' the 'almost crawling? Baby' and the *Beloved* of the title.... Sethe is willing to murder her children

rather than have them taken back when a slavecatcher comes after they've escaped and are living at 124, in a house not far from Cincinnati.... What did Howard see in the hand prints, or Buglar in the mirror? How many years did these boys put up with the spite of the baby's venom? Everything in Morrison's way of rendering creates distance, a sense that she will in her own sweet time tell us all she thinks we need to know and no more. And, by the end of the novel the hand prints and the face are still unclear to me, and I've read *Beloved* twice, once aloud.

So Stanley Crouch is out of court when he calls the novel a soap opera. In a soap we are supposed to respond, fully, directly, and right now, to each scene put in front of us, while for long stretches of *Beloved* we simply don't know how to do this, because we don't know yet what we're seeing. Crouch is just finding an easy way to put the book down. For the same reason, he is quite mistaken when he suggests this is like a Holocaust novel (for Concentration Camps read Slavery). There are horrible images of things that happened to slaves here, no question. Sethe is held down and milked by some young men, one of her companions is bridled and bitted like a mule and spends a horrible stretch in a chain gang, another is burned alive after being caught trying to escape. But Morrison's art makes us gasp at these moments, then insists we not organize our feeling as if for protest or other action, but instead move back into the heavy verbal texture of her fiction....

Morrison is so constantly telling you and not telling you, telling you a bit more but leaving you wondering if you've missed something, that she encourages, almost forces, readers to read too fast, to rush ahead to the clarifying moments. The book became a page turner for me the first time through. My guess is that the result will be some enthralled readers who will end up unsure what they have read, and perhaps a smaller number—and my money is on their being mostly men—of unenchanted ones who end up praising Morrison's lyric gifts and claiming that as a novel it is mostly a trick.... Not everyone is going to find out how beautifully this book reads when read slowly and in small doses....

When Stanley Crouch comes to his senses, he will have to examine the motives in linking Morrison and *Beloved* with Alice Walker and *The Color Purple* concerning their treatment of black men. Since Morrison not only treats Paul D with admiration and respect—at a number of points one is grateful indeed for his presence among a group of women who seem almost lunatic—but reserves for him some of her most lavish and loving praise. My guess is that Crouch's feelings follow a logic similar to this: *The Color Purple* is a not very good novel that was adored by black women and white folks; it looks as though the same thing will happen with *Beloved*; if I can suggest that Morrison is 'not good about' black men too, maybe I can get away with calling *Beloved* trite and sentimental; Morrison has a lot more talent than Walker, and I need to stop this stampede—call them 'feminists' as if that *were* a dirty word—soon. Crouch got one thing right: *The Color Purple* is not a very good novel... Though the events of *Beloved* could be arranged to make a drama, though there is a grand climatic scene, the book is elegy, pastoral, sad, sweet, mysterious."

Roger Sale
"Toni Morrison's *Beloved*"
Massachusetts Review 29.1
(Spring 1988) 81-86

"*Beloved* provides an unexpected view of the horrors of black heritage. It is an attempt at defining black history as a serious and committed black would see it. As a dual-purpose work, *Beloved* is arguably Morrison's most political book, but it builds on themes raised in the earlier four novels, such as mother-daughter conflicts and questions concerning the strength of the female community and the supernatural. Set in the early aftermath of slave times, the story suggests that a community of women can be strong under racial and sexual oppression. In this book, Morrison wrestles with metaphysical aspects of black experience. For her, female power has not sprung up in the late twentieth century; rather, it has always existed, even during slavery. Sethe and her friends triumph over tyranny as much as Jadine does. In 1988, *Beloved* won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction."

Timothy J. Cox
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 3
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1072-73

“Unlike the slave narratives which sought to be all-inclusive eyewitness accounts of the material conditions of slavery, Morrison’s novel exposes the unsaid of the narratives, the psychic subtexts that lie within and beneath the historical facts.... The actual story upon which the novel is based is an 1855 newspaper account of a runaway slave from Kentucky named Margaret Garner. When she realizes she is about to be recaptured in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Law, she kills her child rather than allow it to return to a ‘future of servitude.’ Indeed, the story itself involves a conflation of past, present and future in a single act. In the novel, Margaret Garner becomes Sethe, a fugitive slave whose killing of her two-year-old daughter, Beloved, haunts her first as a ghost and later as a physical reincarnation.

But time is not so much conflated as fragmented in the fictional rendering of the tale. Moreover, the text contains not only Sethe’s story or version of the past, but those of her friend and eventual lover, Paul D., her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, her remaining child, a daughter named Denver, and later, Beloved herself. Each of their fragments amplifies or modifies Sethe’s narrative for the reader. In that the fragments constitute voices which speak to and comment on one another, the text illustrates the call and response pattern of the African-American oral tradition.

The setting of the novel is 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sethe resides in a small house with her daughter, Denver. Her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, has recently died and her two sons, Howard and Buglar, have left home, unable to live any longer in a ghost-haunted house with a mother who seems oblivious or indifferent to the disturbing, disruptive presence. Sethe seems locked in memories of her escape from slavery, the failure of her husband, Halle, to show up at the planned time of escape, her murder of her child, and the Kentucky plantation referred to by its benevolent white slave owner as Sweet Home. One of the Sweet Home men, Paul D., inadvertently arrives on her porch after years of wandering, locked in his own guilt, alienation and shame from the psychic scars of slavery. They become lovers, but more importantly, his arrival initiates the painful plunge into the past through the sharing of their individual stories, memories and experiences. Unable to tolerate the presence of the ghost, however, he drives it away, only to be driven away himself by his inability to cope with Sethe’s obsession with Denver, whom he calls a ‘room-and-board witch.’

A bond of affection unites Sethe, Denver and Beloved until Denver realizes that her mother has become oblivious to her and has begun to devote her attention exclusively to Beloved. As she watches her mother deteriorate physically and mentally in the grips of overwhelming guilt and consuming love, Denver realizes she must abandon the security of home to get help for her mother and to rid their lives of Beloved once and for all. With the help of the black community, she eventually rescues her mother and Beloved vanishes.... Sethe modifies, amplifies and subverts her own memory of the murder that serves as the locus of the narrative. In fact, even in freedom she lives in a kind of psychic bondage to the task of ‘keeping the past at bay.’ While she had murdered Beloved to save her from the future, she raises Denver by “keeping her from the past’....

While all texts develop to a certain extent by secrecy or by what information they withhold and gradually release to the reader, the text of *Beloved* moves through a series of narrative starts and stops that are complicated by Sethe’s desire to forget or ‘disremember’ the past. Thus, at the same time that the reader seeks to know ‘the how and why’ of Sethe’s infanticide, Sethe seeks to withhold that information not only from everyone else, but even from herself. Thus, the early sections of the novel reveal the complex ways in which memories of the past disrupt Sethe’s concerted attempt to forget.... Throughout the novel there are similar passages that signal the narrative tension between remembering and forgetting....

When Paul D. arrives at Sethe’s home on 124 Bluestone, Denver seeks to frighten this unwanted guest away by telling him they have a ‘lonely and rebuked’ ghost on the premises. The obsolete meaning of rebuked—repressed—not only suggests that the ghost represents repressed memory, but that, as with anything that is repressed, it eventually resurfaces or returns in one form or another. Paul D.’s arrival is a return of sorts in that he is reunited with Sethe, his friend from Mr. Garner’s Sweet Home plantation. His presence signals an opportunity to share both the positive and negative memories of life there....

Morrison’s purpose is not to convince white readers of the slave’s humanity, but to address black readers by inviting us to return to the very part of our past that many have repressed, forgotten or ignored.

At the end of the novel, after the community has helped Denver rescue her mother from Beloved's ferocious spell by driving her out of town, Paul D. returns to Sethe 'to put his story next to hers.' Despite the psychic healing that Sethe undergoes, however, the community's response to her healing is encoded in the choruslike declaration on the last two pages of the text, that this was 'not a story to pass on'."

Marilyn Sanders Mobley
"A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*"
Toni Morrison, ed. Harold Bloom
(Chelsea 1990) 192-97

"Set in Cincinnati in 1873, eight years after the end of the Civil War, *Beloved* is nevertheless a novel about slavery. The characters have been so profoundly affected by the experience of slavery that time cannot separate them from its horrors or undo its effects. Indeed, by setting the novel during Reconstruction Morrison invokes the inescapability of slavery, for the very name of the period calls to mind the havoc and destruction wrought during the antebellum and war years....

Slaves in the novel are shown to withstand oppression at a number of levels. Paul D feels a kind of existential humiliation when he realizes that he was only a Sweet Home man because of the whims of his master and that the barnyard rooster possessed a greater autonomy than he himself did. Sethe felt profoundly insulted by Schoolteacher's research on her own and her fellow slaves' racial characteristics. Sethe and Baby Suggs are acutely sensitive to the power that slavery has over the bonds between kin. Yet despite the recognition of these sorts of philosophical and political and emotional deprivations, *Beloved* seems especially engaged with the havoc wrought upon black bodies under slavery: the circular scar under Sethe's mother's breast and the bit in her mouth; the bit in Paul D's mouth; Sethe's stolen breast milk and flowering back; Sixo's roasting body, to name but a few. Not only do Sethe's memories of slavery come to her sensorily, through her body, but perhaps more obviously, she wears on her body the signs of her greatest ordeal at the Sweet Home plantation. The story of the brutal handling she endured under slavery—the stealing of her breast milk and the beating that ensued—is encoded in the scars on her back. Their symbolic power is evident in the number of times that others attempt to read them....

The act of intercourse with Beloved restores Paul D to himself, restores his heart to him.... In a variety of ways, then, Morrison calls attention to the suffering that bodies endured under slavery. The project of the novel, much like Baby Suggs's project, seems to be to reclaim those bodies, to find a way to tell the story of the slave body in pain.... Beloved's presence allows the generally reticent Sethe to tell stories from her past. Once Sethe realizes that the stranger called Beloved and her baby Beloved are one and the same, she gives herself over fully to the past, and to Beloved's demand for comfort and curing. Indeed, so complete are her attempts to make things right with Beloved that she is almost consumed by her. Without Denver's and her neighbors' and Paul D's interventions pulling her back into the present, she would have been doomed to annihilation....

We read the unspeakable and unspoken thoughts of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, first separately, then interwoven. Here from Sethe's perspective are her memories of killing her daughter, of being beaten, of being abandoned by her mother. Largely addressed to Beloved, Sethe's words convey recollections she could never utter to another. Likewise, in her section, Denver expresses her fear of her mother and her yearning to be rescued by her father, anxieties that, for the most part, had been hidden previously in the novel. Beloved's is, however, the most riveting and most obscure of the monologues. For here is represented the preconscious subjectivity of a victim of infanticide.... But in addition to her feelings and desires from the grave, Beloved seems also to have become one, in death, with the black and angry dead who suffered through the Middle Passage... In the body of Beloved, then, individual and collective pasts and memories seem to have become united and inseparable.... The final portion of the novel similarly calls attention to the inexpressibility of its subject.... Beloved's existence is predicated upon a communal memory of her; she dissolves when they forget and swallow her all away. And yet in her very dissolution and absence, in the communal denial of her existence, she remains present.... To the extent that *Beloved* returns the slaves to themselves, the novel humbles contemporary readers before the unknown and finally unknowable horrors the slaves endured."

Valerie Smith

“‘Circling the Subject’: History and Narrative in *Beloved*”
Toni Morrison: *Critical Perspectives Past and Present*
eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah
(Amistad 1993) 345, 347-48, 350-52, 354

“Sethe’s story—her life under slavery, the conception and care of her children in the most dire conditions, her escape and liberation, and her desperately violent and loving act of infanticide—provides, in a sense, the background for the story of Eva. *Beloved* explains Eva’s anger, an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children’s lives, no voice in their upbringing. And *Beloved* suggests why that anger may have to remain unspeakable, and how it might nevertheless be spoken. In fact, the mother-daughter conversations that do occur in *Beloved* are conversations from beyond the grave; if Sethe is to explain her incomprehensible act, she has to do so to a ghost.

Beloved provides some of the insights into mothers and women that *Sula* begins to adumbrate, and it does so all the more intensely for telling the story of a mother who is a slave.... At the end of the novel, the doubly bereaved Sethe, who has lost her daughter twice, is nursed back to life by her other daughter Denver and by her lover, Paul D. To her self-effacing, ‘she was my best thing,’ he insists, ‘you your best thing, Sethe. You are’.... With this novel, Toni Morrison has done more than to shift the direction of her own work and of feminist theorizing: along with writers like Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen, she has opened the space for maternal narrative in feminist fiction.”

Marianne Hirsch
“Maternal Narratives: ‘Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood’”
Critical Perspectives (1993) 271-72

“Stamp Paid, one of the most engaging characters in the book, is certainly owned during slavery, but he is not possessed. In the classic sense of the creation of an alternative reality that Ralph Ellison identified with the ingenuity that shaped black folk tradition, Stamp Paid learns to separate his vision of himself from those of the slaveholders who would define his essence for him. Like Frederick Douglass, Stamp Paid’s body may be enslaved, but his mind is elsewhere. When he actually frees his body, he turns to collecting what slaveholders owe black people by ferrying recently escaped slaves into the free territory of Ohio and other points North. His activities are also a recognition of what he articulates as his debt to his fellow blacks. Formerly called by the slave name Joshua, Stamp Paid is a man who has earned his freedom by acquiescing in the repeated rape of his young wife Vashti by the youthful heir to the plantation where he grew up; he had without violence or verbal objection ‘handed over his wife to his master’s son’....

Upon Vashti’s return, Stamp settles into a dissipation from which he eventually arises into a new awareness of what his ‘gift’ to his master has meant. He recognizes that powerlessness is not equivalent to hopelessness, that being owned is not equivalent to being possessed. He can thereby be free in the way that some other Morrison characters, such as Cholly Breedlove (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970), Sula Peace (*Sula*, 1973), and Guitar Bains (*Song of Solomon*, 1977), are free. Unlike these other characters, whose freedom is described as being ‘dangerous,’ Stamp manages to direct his anger into more constructive channels. He has reached a level of maturity or self-control in his freedom that other Morrison characters outside the law or community mores have apparently been unable to attain....

At some point Paul D will have to realize what Joshua had realized and what Sixo proved: slavery could not ultimately dehumanize anyone who did not grant his or her definition of self to the potential dehumanizer; Sethe may have killed Beloved, but she, like Stamp, had paid the dues for that action. ‘Stamp Paid,’ then, is not only Joshua’s public acknowledgment of what he has suffered under slavery and how he has responded to it, but is also a phrase that complements the thematic structure of the novel. All of the characters who have escaped or been freed from slavery have given more than their weight in gold to that system; they have offered up ‘gifts,’ like Stamp, that far outweigh the designations of value assigned to them.... At striking jolts in the narrative, Morrison reverts our attention to the buying and selling of human beings by inserting images of monetary units to describe physical features and to convey states such as frustration and remorse. She suggests thereby that the characters are not as free as they now profess to be, that they have inadvertently inculcated concepts of value from their slave masters, frequently to their own

detriment.... Monetary images also become the language of desire in the novel, as characters express their greatest wants in financial terms....

Although slavery is over, black people are still judging each other through the eyes and the units of measure of those who enslaved them. For a brief moment when Stamp has told Paul D about Sethe, he has abandoned his usual generosity and has joined in sentiment with the black townspeople who have punished Baby Suggs for what they perceive as her uppityness by not warning her about the approaching schoolteacher (as the people in the Bottom avoid Sula for not adhering to their mores). They have concluded that she should pay for her pride in the same way that a slaveholder might conclude that an uppity slave should be punished. Judgment tied to value and expressed in coins ironically shows the human faults in black people that align them with their enslavers. The higher goal of freedom has not yet been complemented with a consistent higher goal of morality. The coin imagery surfaces again when Denver finally gets enough nerve to leave 124 and ask neighbors for help. She encounters an image at the Bodwin house not unlike the Sambo doll that haunts the Invisible Man....

Whether as mammies or sluts, or sometimes sexual partners, or cooks, or nursemaids, black women were especially in the service of their masters during slavery. One dominant image Sethe has retained of herself from that period is that of someone who has 'enough for all,' whether it is milk for Beloved and Denver, meat for the dogs at Sawyer's Restaurant, or food and milk for Paul D, Denver, and Beloved; she has always been at somebody's service, whether voluntarily or not.... Has Sethe, in spite of fighting so valiantly to escape from slavery, allowed her own value to slip until she becomes the 'nigger-slave' to Beloved's 'masterful,' authoritative presence? The coinage of exchange, the dynamics of value have now come to undermine the mother/daughter relationship that Sethe sought so desperately to release from the system of bartering with human lives. Like an insatiable, exacting slave master who feels entitled to service, Beloved never gets enough of anything; all Sethe's efforts must be exerted for her pleasure....

Beloved's power resides in Sethe's willingness to please; though it is based in guilt, its surface manifestation is no different from that of the acquiescent slave who believes that, other possibilities notwithstanding, his destiny resides with his master, and he is just as willing to serve as the stereotypical Sambo suggests.... Can Sethe's and Beloved's perceptions of mother love or sister love, as they are manifested here, be put on the same par of anathema with slavery? In carving out a definition of motherhood in a world where she had no models for that status, in shaping a concept of love from a void, Sethe has erred on the side of excess, a destructive excess that inadvertently gives primacy to the past and death rather than to life and the future....

The philosophy Morrison develops here is that the price of human existence cannot be placated through escapism—not that of Sethe killing her child, or of Baby Suggs willing herself to death, or any other form. Unquestionably slavery was horrible, but no horror can outweigh the gift of life. Morrison's assertion that killing Beloved was the right thing to do, but that Sethe didn't have the right to do it seems to support this idea; given the moment in slavery and the moment in Sethe's anxious existence, only that solution seemed possible for her, yet if she does not have the right to kill Beloved, then some other option must have been available (a return to slavery for a later escape attempt? Killing Schoolteacher instead of her child and suffering that consequence?). Even with Beloved's death, Sethe's safety and that of her children is not guaranteed. It is only what Schoolteacher perceives as the sheer atrocity of her act that makes him turn and go (and perhaps shatters his theories of the human and animal divisions he has made)."

Trudier Harris
"Escaping Slavery but Not Its Images"
Critical Perspectives (1993) 330-40

"Most of the students to whom I have taught the novel have been white. And what has struck me and created a moment of pedagogical pause, as a black woman professor, has been the students' seemingly paralyzing responses of guilt, embarrassment, and hurt. Students have said quietly to me after reading this novel, 'How can you even *look* at me after reading this novel?' As some students have accepted personally the blame for the atrocities in this novel, others have expressed everything from cavalier rejection of the awful ways of the whites in *Beloved* to tearful and apologetic 'I didn't know's as they have claimed contemporary distancing from their ancestors. Black students, too, have been caught up in the horrifying

historical events of this text, and...they have had equally paralyzing responses of anger and disbelief—at the treatment of the slaves and at both the ghost and the killing of the child.... And while I believe some guilt-ridden or angry revelations are healthy and necessary, I am troubled by the cowering deference of mostly white students to these first responses: they lie down for their beating, they shut up, they agree. They don't dare question or challenge me or the text....

Sethe's killing of her child in *Beloved* is based on the story of a slave woman, Margaret Garner, who killed one of her children and tried to kill the rest to prevent them from being returned to slavery. Morrison said that after reading Garner's story 'I didn't do any more research at all about that story. I did a lot of research about everything else in the book—Cincinnati, and abolitionists, and the Underground Railroad—but I refused to find out anything else about Margaret Garner. I really wanted to invent her life'....

The largest portion of the self-defining humanity of the black characters in *Beloved*, surprisingly enough in a world filled with hatred, is their manifestations of love... Sethe's motivation before and after the killing of her child is a desire to love.... Paul D is also motivated by love.... Baby Suggs, because of her knowledge of the power of love and her insistence on imparting that knowledge to others, takes it as the text for her memorable sermon in the clearing.... There are other examples: Denver's love for Beloved, Sixo's love for the Thirty-Mile Woman, Halle's love for Baby Suggs. The novel progressively becomes a story about the ability, the willingness of those who were not beloved, to love. The other manifestations of the characters' humanity, and to my mind the bravest and most remarkable example of Morrison's ability to represent her characters on their own terms, is their ability to claim their own guilt and in turn seek their own forgiveness with one another.... Indeed, much of the present-time focus of the story concerns the characters' working out, or facing the consequences of violating, their own codes....

The community, feeling Baby Suggs is too prosperous, too prideful, does not warn her and the others of the coming of strangers.... Believing Sethe's actions are too extreme and her response to the deed irreverent and arrogant, the community ostracizes her for 'trying to do it all alone with her nose in the air'.... The community members must not only face their guilt over the death of the baby but also work out their terms for forgiveness—for themselves and for Sethe. Denver comes to realize that even the ghost has gone too far in violating a daughter's respect for her mother and finally brings the conflict to a halt with a cry for help: 'Somebody had to be saved.... Nobody was going to help her unless she told it—told all of it.' And when Ella hears Denver's story, she too agrees that Beloved's actions have surpassed what is reasonable and acceptable in the community—even for a ghost....

Determined to restore the moral order in the community, Ella leads a group of thirty neighborhood women in prayer to the house on Bluestone Road to exorcise the ghost and offer Sethe forgiveness. All these characters are motivated in their anger, their guilt, and their forgiveness by the black community's code of ethics. Slavery gets none of them off the hook, and they must answer to themselves and their community before they finally achieve forgiveness and are able to move forward. This is the powerful subject of the novel: How a people try to keep their humanity intact in a world whose morality and humanity is turned upside down—and how they succeed.... What lies beyond the bitterness of the history revealed in this novel is a people trying desperately, triumphantly, dangerously even, to forgive and to love....

The only student response that is usually similar to a character's involves the killing of the child. Many students disagree with this option, but most see it as heroic. What is interesting is that this response is precisely the one for which Sethe has to pay and of which the community disapproves. Even though Morrison, as the 'defense,' presents a case that seems to justify the action, it is also the action for which Sethe pays throughout most of the novel. Herein lies the complexity of the novel... [Students] understand that Morrison has not allowed slavery to destroy Sethe's human ability for love *or* for guilt. They better understand Morrison when she says of Sethe's action: '[Sethe] did the right thing but she didn't have the right to do it'."

Carolyn C. Denard
"Beyond the Bitterness of History: Teaching *Beloved*"
Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison
eds. Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle

“I begin by introducing the African American literary tradition as a series of conversations about what it means to be a person of African descent on American soil. I identify five pivotal periods in the series: from the African past to enslavement; from enslavement to Reconstruction; from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance; from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement of the sixties; and from the Black Arts Movement to the present.... Morrison enters the series of conversations with a narrative project to tell stories that have not been told, to tell old stories in a new way, and to speak the ‘unspeakable things’ that have been left unspoken.”

Marilyn Sanders Mobley
“Telling Stories: A Cultural Studies Approach to *Tar Baby*”
Approaches (1997) 142

“In *Beloved* Toni Morrison is not as concerned with recording historical facts as she is with constructing meaning and emotional *truth* out of them.... *Beloved* is a creative dialogue with the Margaret Garner story.... Before *Beloved* Margaret Garner was one of American history’s unknown fugitive slave mothers; although the story of her escape and the murder of her child was sensationalized in 1856, it was quickly forgotten.... On the night of 27 January 1856 seventeen slaves—men, women, and children—fled from Kentucky to Ohio.... Because they realized that such a large group of blacks traveling together would cause suspicion, they decided to break up into two groups.... While hiding in the home of a manumitted relative outside Cincinnati, [the Garner family of eight] were apprehended under the infamous Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which stated that any escaped slave could be seized by a white person in any state and returned to the slave owner. During the violent apprehension Margaret Garner attempted to kill her four children by cutting their throats with a knife, but the older children ran into a back room. She succeeded in killing her three-year-old daughter....

In the newspaper accounts Garner was a heroic black mother, and the supporters of slavery kept quiet for a while. It must be remembered that her deed, although not the first of its kind, occurred at a time of rising antislavery activity, and the incident embarrassed the Southern cause.... Morrison...explores how Sethe hurts as deeply as she loves her children. The community of former slaves leaves Sethe alone after she serves her time. They will not condemn her, but neither can they condone the murder.”

Angelita Reyes
“Using History as Artifact to Situate *Beloved*’s Unknown Woman: Margaret Garner”
Approaches (1997) 77, 79-80

“Teaching *Beloved* involves an overwhelming contradiction: teachers promise students that what at first appears incomprehensible will eventually become familiar and ascertainable, while as teachers they realize that vast sections of the text elude the critic’s touch and give way to revelation only gradually, if not stubbornly....

In his efforts to forget the past, Paul D seeks to disrupt Sethe’s ontology by destroying 124’s interior space in order to compel a skeptical Sethe to choose between the living embodiment of the past that he represents and the enduring spirit of place that has inhabited the residence since what Steamp Paid terms ‘The Misery’ of Sethe’s act of infanticide. Paul D’s refusal to recognize the rights of the child’s spirit to inhabit its place apparently necessitates its reembodyment as the mysterious and even more disruptive *Beloved*. Both readings provide adequate examples of how the text seeks to depict a cosmology dissimilar to the often dichotomous Western binary one.... While Sethe needs an alternative worldview to survive in and out of slavery, it can blur her perception of events affecting her approach to living....

As Sethe conjures a scene of false possibilities, students can see most vividly the transforming effects of Paul D’s presence and of his banishment of the spirit. Swept away by wishful thinking and the spectacle of shadow projection much as the black townspeople are by the carnival’s false promises of unnatural wonders, Sethe ignores the radical disunity among Paul D, Denver, and her....

The effects of the Fugitive Slave Law are evident in the community of 124—it is the thing that Sethe flees from, the reason she commits infanticide, and ultimately a discourse that threatens to spill over into her conception of time and space by making every place a potential space for the capture of black bodies. Nothing, not even Baby Suggs's clearing, is sacred anymore. Beloved's fleshly embodiment during the walk home from the carnival suggests the impossibility of keeping the past at bay and exemplifies how the characters of 124 cannot escape the dominance of hegemony—the language of slavery....

Sethe's tale is actually an imaginary reshaping of a real event—the story of Margaret Garner, a slave who in 1856 escaped from her owner in Kentucky and fled to Cincinnati. When she realized that she would be captured and returned, she slit the throat of her daughter and was arrested before she could kill her other children. To this day scholars are not certain what became of the real Margaret Garner. Picking up twenty-one years after the killing, *Beloved* asks that Sethe be accountable for her actions and that readers participate in the unmaking of her narrative....

Part 2 of the novel is perhaps its most challenging and puzzling. Students often have trouble reading Beloved's stream-of-consciousness dialogue.... For this mother and her daughters, the meeting by the frozen creek symbolizes their worlds arrested and stationary for the moment; the three women are 'falling' into a relationship with one another that will be defined by each of their marginal positions. After this scene, Sethe will succumb to the pain of memory and leave behind the forgetfulness encouraged by Paul D's presence and worldview; Beloved will literally claim Sethe as might an ancestor (and, later, an evil spirit); and Denver ultimately moves from this community to seek help from the outside community that had ostracized her and her family since 'The Misery.' Moreover, the suspension of their worlds is stressed by the frozen creek, a space as liminal as that which Sethe, Beloved, and Denver occupy. As a tributary of the river, the creek serves as a symbolic extension of their complex relationship....

Instead of peace, Beloved seeks retribution, not only as a daughter killed by her mother but also as a spirit whose space—whose enduring presence and tangibility—has been violated.... Paul D, driven from 124 by his inability to deal with Sethe's infanticide, sits in exile through most of Part 2.... When the individual lives of the women emerge in part 2 of the novel, the men are at a safe distance. In fact, throughout *Beloved*, Paul D's and Stamp Paid's texts and story making are kept outside the collective voice of 124. To surmise that Morrison is saying that men's narratives always sit outside women's would misrepresent the men's roles in the novel. Instead, we might say that Morrison arrives at a notion of ritual—women's ritual—that must take place for the community to heal and for male and female narratives to rest side by side....

The assembly moves Beloved, the embodied spirit, from 124 with a 'sound' that is not rooted in Christianity, though clearly Morrison's passage refigures John 1.1.... This sound, however, moves beyond experience of this new world, beyond narrative—beyond the narratable—and the margins of the women's existence to connect with and revoice African discursive practices and cosmological states. The vibration from this sound invades the spirit space Beloved occupies and returns her to the water, which disembodies, as it were, this spirit whose place-space in the lives of Sethe and Denver had not heretofore been questioned....

Having atoned for her sins, Sethe (and, by extension, other members of *Beloved*'s African American community such as Ella, Stamp Paid, and Paul D, who have inflicted heart-wrenching pain on others) has no need to bump into Beloved's disembodied spirit or seriously to consider the implications of its presence. And while Beloved's spirit is not at rest, Sethe's brain, heretofore 'greedy' to form pictures of pain, learns not to absorb its machinations into its recesses. As Morrison writes, 'Although [Beloved] has claim, she is not claimed.' While Beloved gets and literally is the last word in the novel, Sethe has learned to banish the spirit not from its place in the outside world but rather from her interior, from her brain."

Sharon P. Holland and Michael Awkward
"Marginality and Community in *Beloved*"
Approaches (1997) 48-55

“The emotional alternation in Denver’s story between heroism and abjection resembles the alternation in Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* between constant revivals of nearly impossible hopes and a repeated depression and sense of powerlessness that is usually unarticulated except as projected onto a cultural other like Jim.... I want to suggest, in other words, that Morrison’s novel engages with Twain’s in the way that *Beloved* draws out and expands on conflicts and fears just at the limits of *Huckleberry Finn*’s reach.... Amy Denver does find herself drawn, like Huck, unpredictably, almost unaccountably, into helping a slave escape.”

Richard C. Moreland

“He wants to put his story next to hers’: Putting Twain’s Story Next to Hers in Morrison’s *Beloved*”
Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches, ed. Nancy J. Peterson
(Johns Hopkins 1997) 158-60, 164

“Despite Morrison’s careful planning of so much of the book, she indicates, in the first chapter, two conflicting dates for the narrative’s present time action: 1873 and 1881. I see no way of resolving this conflict, and apart from specious generalizations about Morrison’s dramatizing the difficulty of reconstructing history, I cannot find any account of its functionality. The conflict is an instance of the erroneous, a small distraction (if noticed at all) that has no positive contribution to make...”

Just as the preacher at *Beloved*’s funeral began by addressing his audience, ‘Dearly beloved,’ so Morrison ends by addressing us as ‘Beloved.’ The intratextual link makes it a gesture of affection and a reminder of the challenge: we are beloved, not yet Dearly Beloved. This reminder of the character’s naming effectively blocks any impulse to romanticize the character even as we keep her story alive: the reminder calls back what Sethe did to get the name on the tombstone and, indeed, calls back the knowledge that ‘Beloved’ is the tombstone marker itself.”

James Phelan

“Toward a Rhetorical Reader-Response Criticism:
The Difficult, the Stubborn, and the Ending of *Beloved*”
Approaches (1997) 231, 239

“For Morrison, this publication was a conscious act toward healing a painful wound: a studied memorial to the great social wrong of the enslavement of Africans. Her powerful words, on behalf of millions, give voice to a profound lament: the absence of a historical marker to remind us never to let this atrocity happen again.... As if responding in kind to her expression of grief, and accepting her offering, readers almost unanimously acknowledge the book as a major literary achievement of great purpose. The momentum it generated on its appearance has not abated a decade later. In the attention that they give to it, scholars, general readers, students, and critics alike continue to assess *Beloved* as one of the great books of this century.... Only one of her earlier works, *Song of Solomon* (1977), rivaled *Beloved* in the immediacy of the glowing public response it received.... There is little question at this time that of all her novels, this is the one most often taught and the one most written about across the world....

On one hand, Morrison saw no moral justification for Garner’s crime, even in the face of the brutality of the institution in question. On the other, she wondered if it were a worse thing for a mother to do to turn her children over to a living death. Therein was her dilemma.... Set in 1873, roughly a decade after the Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery, *Beloved* is the story of a former slave, Sethe, who eighteen years earlier had escaped from Kentucky to Ohio. Ahead of her she sent her three babies, one yet-unnamed girl and two little boys. On the way she gave birth to another daughter, Denver. Tracked to her new home by her slave owner, Sethe reacted by cutting the throat of her ‘crawling-already’ older daughter and would have done the same with the other children had she not been stopped. For destruction of property (the child as slave), she served a jail sentence. By the time she is released, the ghost of the dead baby, Beloved (the name Sethe inscribed on the headstone of her grave), has come to haunt the house the family occupies.

Unresigned to the mischievous spirit and out of fear of their mother, the two boys leave home as soon as they feel they can take care of themselves, but Sethe and Denver accept the baby ghost and the disruptions she causes as part of their lives. This situation changes when Paul D, another former slave from Sweet Home, the plantation on which Sethe previously lived, arrives. First, with brute force, he rids the house of the ghost and he and Sethe become lovers. Soon after, an unknown woman, who behaves strangely and

appears to be the age that the dead baby would have been had she lived arrives. She calls herself Beloved. Although she seems to know almost nothing else about herself that would usefully identify her, Beloved soon becomes a powerful force in the house.

Against his will, she forces Paul D out, first from the house and then from Sethe's life. Meanwhile, Sethe, the target of Beloved's attention and the person from whom she seeks retribution, cannot keep from becoming completely enthralled by the intruder, for Sethe believes that Beloved is the reincarnation of the child she murdered. As a result, Sethe suffers physical and psychological deterioration until Denver, anxious for her mother's life, seeks help from the black women in the community. Under the gaze of the collective force of the women who respond to the call, Beloved disappears, and for the first time in her life, Denver finds the courage to make life plans that promise positive changes for the entire community. The story concludes with Paul D's return to a recovering Sethe, to whom he offers himself in a partnership for a life they might build together.... In plotting the action, Morrison has said that she came to a point where, after asking herself who had the right to judge Sethe's action, she knew that she did not, nor did anyone else except the child Sethe killed. Then Beloved inserted herself into the narrative....

Much of *Beloved* is given over to the tortured internal lives of the former slaves: Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs (Sethe's mother-in-law, whose son Halle, Sethe's husband, worked years of Sundays to buy his mother's freedom but did not himself survive slavery), and Stamp Paid, a former slave and Underground Railroad conductor who ferried escaping slaves across the Ohio. So grotesque were many of their experiences, and so vulnerable did they feel, that for them the act of remembering was risky, shameful, and dangerous. In addition to the wrongs she suffered, Sethe was haunted by the memory of killing her child. She observed that much of her life was a struggle to 'keep the past at bay.'

Always as concerned with process as product, Morrison focuses in *Beloved* on the healing process that returns dignity to a people from whom it had been unceremoniously stripped. But only in remembering, recounting, listening to, and accepting their individual and collective pasts does healing take place. In reclaiming and recreating the lives of those who lived through slavery Morrison writes a new history that enables her characters and readers to reconsider the wounds of a shameful past in a manner that exorcises the ghost of Beloved."

Nellie Y. McKay, ed. Introduction
Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook
eds. McKay and Williams L. Andrews
(Oxford 1999) 3-4, 7-10

"*Beloved* is set in part in the same place and during the same period as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Sweet Home's northern Kentucky must be near the location of the Shelby plantation, and both novels' initial action represents a response to the Fugitive Slave Act. Moreover, *Beloved*'s main action takes place near Cincinnati in 1852, which was the Beechers' home [where Harriet Beecher Stowe had lived] from 1832 to 1849—a significant factor in Stowe's writing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, since it was there that she gained firsthand experience of recently 'freed' slaves. The mid-1850s also saw both the waning of the housing reform movements in the North as houses served more and more materialistic goals [?] and the 'reconstruction' of the patriarchal structure of the South. Finally, both novelists use and remodel traces of slave history to create narratives that will also remodel the ideologies that dominate the country's power structure. Yet both novels remain haunted by the figures that represent that power....

Beloved offers an exemplary Victorian model home, Sweet Home, as a critique of a system covered with the 'bigonias' of the domestic ideal but built of the 'rough logs' of slavery. Mrs. Garner is presented as a self-sacrificing, motherly woman. She works hard, humming alongside the quiet Baby Suggs without complaint.... Stowe began the remodeling by using the domestic ideal as new form of global female empowerment. But her matriarchal ideal does not finally alter the basic structure of the patriarchy—as a true remodeling must. It shifts power into the hands of a female head of the household who continues operating under the ultimate control of a patriarchal, slave-owning God. By setting up her text as a conscious parallel to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Morrison reentered this structure to continue the remodeling and demonstrated how to alter irreversibly the power structure of the patriarchal home.... Then the ghosts of the patriarchy may finally cease to have power over, if not to cease haunting, the houses of women's fiction."

“Dedicating her novel *Beloved* to the ‘Sixty Million and more’ who failed to survive the Middle Passage, Morrison sets out to give voice to the ‘disremembered and unaccounted for’—the women and children who left no written records.... ‘Beloved’ is the public inscription of a private memorial—seven letters chiseled into the pink headstone of a child-victim of ‘mother-love,’ a word Sethe had remembered from the preacher’s funeral eulogy. If the inscription of *Beloved* is the trace (‘the mark left behind’) that initiates the novel’s plot, it is also an image that haunts the text in the multiple guises of the character *Beloved*....

‘Things too terrible to relate’ were most often the sexual exploitation of slave women by white men. Convention allowed, indeed almost demanded, that these violations be named but not described.... The writer’s ‘job’—as Morrison sees it—‘becomes how to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate,’ to ‘find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn’t write it,’ to ‘fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left, to part the veil that was so frequently drawn’... Rather than measuring a division *between* the races...Morrison’s veil measures a division *within* the race, a psychic and expressive boundary separating the *speaking* from the *unspeakable* and the *unspoken*. Her task as a writer, therefore, is to transgress these discursive boundaries by setting up a complementary and dialogic relationship between the ‘interiority’ of her own work and the ‘exteriority’ of the slave narrative....

As Jehovah reclaimed the Israelites after their apostasy (figured in Hosea as spiritual adultery), so Morrison seeks to repossess the African and slave ancestors after their historic violation (figured in *Beloved* as physical rape).... Engaging the Scriptures as a kind of intertext, Morrison enacts in her novel an opposition between the law and the spirit, redeeming her characters from the ‘curse of the law’ as figured in the master’s discourse. In her rewriting of Scripture, Morrison ushers in an ironic new dispensation figured not by the law of the (white) Father but by the spirit of the (black and female) child, *Beloved*. Thus, Morrison challenges the hegemonic status of the (primarily male) slave narratives as well as the ‘canonical’ history embodied in the master(‘s) narratives....

The scenes with schoolteacher offer a paradigm for reading the methodology of the white male as a scholar and master.... Sethe’s ‘savagery’ confirms schoolteacher’s ‘civilization’; her ‘bestiality’ assures his ‘humanity.’ Schoolmaster’s sense of history is defined by the struggle between culture and nature, and questions of meaning and interpretation turn upon this opposition. The dismemberment of schoolteacher’s method is the discursive analog to the dismemberment of slavery.... As both slaveholder and scholar, schoolteacher is involved with the *dismembering* of slaves from their families, their labor, their selves.... The scenes of Paul D’s figurative dismemberment both refigure the earlier scene of schoolteacher’s anatomical dismemberment of Sethe and prefigure a later scene that Sethe vainly attempts to forget.... Ironically, Sethe herself has mixed schoolteacher’s ink... The image of schoolteacher’s ink converges with the expropriation of Sethe’s milk....

Beloved becomes the twin self or mirror of Sethe and other women in the novel.... *Beloved* is associated with her maternal and paternal grandmothers and the generation of slave women who failed to survive the Middle Passage.... *Beloved*’s persistent questions enable Sethe to remember long-forgotten traces of her own mother, traces carried through memory as well as through the body.... Sethe’s name recalls the Old Testament Hebrew name ‘Seth,’ meaning ‘granted’ or ‘appointed.’ (Eve named her third-born child Seth...) In this instance, Sethe seems to signify the child whose life was spared or ‘granted’ by her mother, who did not keep the offspring of her white rapists.... It is the fingerprints on *Beloved*’s forehead as well as the scar under her chin...that enables Sethe to recognize her daughter returned from ‘the other side’....

Morrison demonstrates both the strength of motherlines in the slave community...The absence of Sethe’s two runaway sons leaves Denver as sole heir and guarantor of the family’s future.... The bonds of the past are broken in a climactic scene in which thirty neighborhood women, unable to ‘countenance the

possibility of sin moving on in the house,' perform a ritual of exorcism, which frees Sethe from the burden of her past.... Morrison...neither condemns nor condones but rather 'delivers' her protagonist. For Sethe achieves redemption through *possession* by the spirit as well as *exorcism* of the spirit. Significantly, for Morrison, it is not through the law...but the spirit...that the individual achieves 'deliverance' from the 'sins of the past.' *Beloved*, then, (re)inscribes the conditions of the promise in the New Testament. What is important for Morrison, however, is the mediation between remembering (possession) and forgetting (exorcism). It is the process of 'working-through' that the author finally affirms.... The narrator's closing reflections ensure the novel's open-endedness and subvert any monologic reading of the final injunction."

Mae G. Henderson

"Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text"
Casebook (1999) 81-82, 85, 88-89, 92-93, 95-96, 98-102

"In her re-visioning of the history of slavery, Morrison proposes a paradigm of that history that privileges the vision of its victims and that denies the closure of death as a way of sidestepping any of that tragedy.... Morrison's reformulation propels a backlog of memories headlong into a post-emancipation community that has been nearly spiritually incapacitated by the trauma of slavery....The 'ghostly' 'historical' presence that intrudes itself into this novel serves to belie the reportage that passes for historical records of this era as well as to reconstruct those lives into the spiritual ways that constituted the dimensions of their living.... It is perhaps the insistence of this alternative perspective in regards to black women's experiences that explains some dimension of the strident element in the critical responses to *Beloved*. Stanley Crouch, who wrote in *The New Republic* that '[I]t seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest,' missed the point entirely....

Even when the narrative structure, for example, dissolves into the eddying recollection of *Beloved*'s memory, the text survives and the reader, almost drowning in the sheer weight of her overwhelmingly tactile recollection, survives this immersion into text because of Morrison's comforting mediation.... Morrison cannot entrust this story to the single, individual discourse of any of the three women who are implicated in the myth. Instead, it is their collective telling that accomplishes the creative process of their task—to tell, (re)member, and validate their own narratives and to place them, full-bodied and spoken, into the space they share.... It collapses all their voices into a tightened poetic chant. Finally the identity of the speaker is absolutely unclear and singularly irrelevant. Sethe's Denver, and *Beloved*'s voices blend and merge as text and lose the distinction of discourse as they narrate....

The consequences of this freedom is that the text, which seems to be literate (i.e., written), is revealed as oracular (i.e., a spoken) event.... Her texts are a constant exchange between an implicit mythic voice, one that struggles against the wall of history to assert itself and an explicit narrator, one that is inextricably bound to its spoken counterpoint.... Living itself is suspended in this story because of the simultaneous presence of the past.... *Beloved* becomes a text collected with the textures of living and dying rather than with a linear movement of events.... The recursion of this text, its sublimation of time and its privileging of an alternative not only to history, but to reality, places it into the tradition of literature by black women because of its dependence on the alternative, the inversion that sustains the 'place' that has re-placed reality."

Karla F. C. Holloway

"*Beloved*: A Spiritual"
Casebook (1999) 68-69, 71-75

"In William Wells Brown's *Clotelle* [1853], the slave mother Isabella would rather commit suicide than face slavery for herself and her children. Hunted by a crowd of dogs and slavecatchers, Isabella leaps into the Potomac as an act symbolizing the 'unconquerable love of liberty which the human heart may inherit.' The chapter is entitled 'Death Is Freedom.' In Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* [1939], slavery is described as an institution in which only death can give freedom. As Amram tells Caleb, '[Y]ou are up against a hard game when you got to die to beat it.' It is an even harder game, Morrison would add, when you have to kill what you love most....

Beloved is more than just a character in the novel, though. She is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be buried, properly: 'Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name'.... Sethe's process of healing occurs when she acknowledges her act and accepts her responsibility for it while also recognizing the reason for her act within a framework larger than that of individual resolve. Here, perhaps, is Morrison's most powerful introjection into the Margaret Garner story—the establishing of a context for Sethe's act. Sethe's own mother kills all the children fathered by the whites who raped her. As Nan, Sethe's grandmother tells her, 'She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them.' Another important person helping Sethe through the exorcising of her painful memories is Ella, who, it is hinted, has also committed infanticide. By placing such a frame around Sethe's story, Morrison insists on the impossibility of judging an action without reference to the terms of its enactment....

Denver is the fictional recreation of Margaret Garner's other daughter, the daughter who survives.... In *Beloved*, Denver becomes the daughter of hope. Denver is not the first to recognize that Beloved is the incarnation of the ghost that had haunted 124; and she is also the first who lives through that recognition and develops the understanding necessary for an affirmative return to life. Like everyone else in the novel, she must learn to confront the past in order to face the future. She, too, must deal with what she has been repressing for most of her life.... Denver will later accuse Beloved, who is the incarnated memory of her own murder, of choking her mother.... It is Denver who hears and identifies her dead sister's presence in the ghost. And by recognizing the ghost's identity, Denver begins the process of confronting the...past... What, finally, Denver is to *Beloved* is the space for hearing the tale of infanticide with a degree of understanding—both as the sister of the murdered baby and as the living daughter of the loving mother.... First, she tells the community that Beloved, the murdered baby, has returned to punish Sethe. It is a story that must be narrated for its subjects to be cured....

Denver had, 'in the beginning,' wished Beloved to stay because Beloved represented the ambiguity she felt about her mother—because Beloved was an accusation always readily available. Denver has since understood that because of a larger communal history, her mother's deed might not be so heinous as she had at first thought. That is not to say that Morrison is trying to negate the guilt Sethe feels, or even attempting to palliate it by reference to an institutional context. Rather, by having both of the daughters listen to Sethe's realization, Morrison represents for us the ambivalent duality of what she considers primarily the black woman writer's way of looking at the world—as she puts it, 'in an unforgiving/loving way.' Each daughter in this novel represents one way. Beloved accuses while Denver embraces; Beloved is unforgiving while Denver is loving."

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy
"Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*"
Casebook (1999) 41, 46-49, 53, 56

"All of African American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore community to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America.... From an American perspective, the novel invokes a lost culture and so serves an elegiac function. From an African context, the novel brings a sense of loss into existence by the power of the word. The novel then represents both a loss and a regeneration simultaneously, both an absence and a presence that point toward the absent and present cultural connections to Africa....

The decentered and residual storytelling tradition in *Beloved* is mediated through the complex and decentered form of the postmodern novel. As a result, *Beloved* makes overt the often covert connections between language and power, narrative and politics. It draws upon the idea of tradition without yielding to the exigencies of...conservatism.... From this perspective the novel stands as a postmodern text that challenges a postmodernism comprising endless aesthetic play and reified alterity.... The linguistic 'play' evident in *Beloved* results from deciphering codes with deadly serious implications. There is in *Beloved* no innocence, no aesthetic word play that does not simultaneously trace political, social, and cultural meanings. In this respect *Beloved* and other multicultural novels distinguish themselves from the full-blown fancy found in texts often termed postmodern. The allusions and processes of symbolic exchange evident in

Beloved work over and over to reentrench the narrative in painful social and historical reality..... The need for endless aesthetic invention can no longer effectively drive contemporary culture.

It is worth emphasizing here: evident in Morrison's text is a break with the ideology of progress overtly and covertly evident in modernist texts. Morrison's novel and the work of other multicultural writers represent a strategic break. Her novel revisits history neither for sheer aesthetic play nor as a neoconservative call upon staid forms of tradition. Rather, Morrison's text offers a radical revisioning and recounting of history. This recounting seeks to highlight the erasure enacted on those who have often paid the dearest price in the race for economic and technological 'progress.' Rather than make her art new—a view linked to a belief in the infinite progress of modern civilization—Morrison discusses her works in terms of rewriting and reinterpreting established forms. Her work, in other words, assumes a Postmodernist position....The novel evokes a narrative that has been decentered by history, the communal voice articulating African-American experiences. It places this voice within the same discursive space as a central narrative form, an aesthetically decentered but culturally privileged Modernism. By juxtaposing these against the historical configuration of slavery and its aftermath, *Beloved* takes quite literally the decentering impulse that informs postmodern culture. The novel places into play an aesthetically decentered novel with a historically dispossessed constituency to reenvision the relationship between storytelling and power. The novel deploys a narrative pastiche in order to contest history as a master narrative....

At a very basic level, *Beloved* makes evident its engagement with postmodernism through the aesthetic play of the novel. Throughout the narrative, *Beloved* reveals a concern with linguistic expression: the evocation of both oral and written discourses, the shifting from third person narration to omniscient narration to interior monologue, the iteration and reiteration of words and phrases and passages. This linguistic and narration variation demonstrates a concern with the production and meaning of language. The text thus spins a story woven of myth that creates a pattern of elaborate linguistic play. By crossing genres and styles and narrative perspectives, *Beloved* filters the absent or marginalized oral discourse of a pre-capitalist black community through the self-conscious discourse of the contemporary novel. The novel emerges, then, at an intersection where premodern and postmodern forms of literary expression cross.

The narrative in *Beloved* highlights processes of reinscription and reinterpretation. It intertwines the mythic, folkloric, and poetic threads of an oral literature with the rhetorical and discursive trajectories of a postmodern literary field. The novel stands amid a cultural context in which play, allusion, quotation serve as privileged aesthetic techniques. It is not enough, however, to claim for *Beloved* the mantle of postmodernism. It and other novels that emerge from multicultural histories serve to foreground the relation between cultural text and sociohistorical context. The 'blackness' of black literary texts, historically read to signify a lack in Western discourse, becomes in Morrison's hands an important thread tying together the complicated realms of politics and aesthetics.... *Beloved* and other multicultural texts hang between being and not being a part of (rather than apart from) contemporary American culture. These texts force a reassessment of what is evoked by the term 'American'."

Rafael Perez-Torres

"Between Presence and Absence: *Beloved*, Postmodernism, and Blackness"
Casebook (1999) 180-81, 184-85, 188, 193-95, 197-98

"We can describe the title character as a witch, a ghost, a devil, or a succubus; in her absence of the tempering emotions that we usually identify with humankind, such as mercy, she is inhumanly vengeful in setting out to repay the one upon whom she places the blame for her too-early death. We should not that this is not the first time that Morrison has called woman Demon....

For Paul D...the house is immediately his enemy, a veritable threat. He perceives that it bodes no good for him, and he senses—more than he knows—that the contest is between male and female spirits.... In his confrontation with the house, Paul D *wills* Beloved's spirit away. His vocal masculine will is stronger than her silent, though sometimes noisy, desire. The power of his voice to command behavior, even that of spirits, is ultimately stronger than the spirit's desire to resist. Or at least that is one possible reading of the confrontation. Another would be to explore it from the perspective of Beloved's demonic nature. In this seeming rite of exorcism, it is not Beloved who is removed but Paul D who is lulled into a false sense of

victory. The demonic Beloved voluntarily leaves the scene in order to prepare for a greater onslaught of female energy. In seemingly forcing Beloved to leave, Paul D, like the heroes of tradition, gives to Sethe and Denver the peace that they have been unable or unwilling to give to themselves. Presumably he has made the society better. The house is quiet, he and Sethe can pretend to be lovers, and the women can contemplate such leisure activities as going to a circus....

But Beloved does not decay. Like a vampire feeding vicariously, she becomes plump in direct proportion to Sethe's increasing gauntness.... In another demonic parallel in the male/female clash, she becomes the traditional succubus, the female spirit who drains the male's life force even as she drains him of his sperm. Beloved makes herself irresistible to Paul D, gradually forcing him, through each sexual encounter, to retreat farther and farther from the territory she has claimed as her own.... Paul D's departure makes clear that Beloved has used her body to drain him not only physically but spiritually as well. He becomes a tramp of sorts, sleeping where he can, drinking excessively, literally a shadow of his former self. From the man who was strong enough to exorcise a spirit, Paul D reverts to his wandering, unsure of his residence from day to day and unclear about what kind of future, if any, he has. The picture of him sitting on the church steps, liquor bottle in hand, stripped of the very maleness that enables him to caress and love the wounded Sethe, is one that shows Beloved's power. There is no need for her to kill Paul D; she simply drains him sufficiently to make him one of the living dead, in a limbolike state from which he cannot extricate himself as long as Beloved reigns at 124 Bluestone Road. For this male warrior, therefore, the demonic female has won over him in the very realm he has used to define himself; his sexual fear of woman is justified....

Think, too, about how Sethe is viewed in the community. Comparable to Sula, she is too proud, too self-sufficient, too independent, generally too much on her own for the neighbors. Her rugged individualism is more characteristic of males than females of the time. The more feminine thing would be for her to need help from the community. She neither seeks nor accepts any before Beloved arrives; later, she is too transformed to care.... By denying to Sethe the power to support herself, Beloved initially attacks Sethe's spirit of independence. She sends her into a stupor comparable to that of Paul D. But Beloved is not content to stupefy Sethe, she is after her life force. She drains her by slowly starving her and, as the neighbors believe, beating her. The apparently pregnant Beloved blossoms, glows, and continues to get plump as the shrinking Sethe literally becomes a skeleton of her former self....

Beloved, the personification of desire, thus epitomizes the demonic. Her lack of caring is spiteful retaliation for not being allowed to live; she is the unleashed force of the childish mentality at which her life ended.... In other words, Beloved is a threat to them in the psychological sphere as effectively as Sula is a threat to the women in the Bottom in the sexual sphere. Extending the philosophy from that novel, where the community is content to recognize evil and let it run its course, the women in *Beloved* cannot afford that detachment. Letting Beloved run her course may mean the destruction of them all.... Exorcising the demonic part of the self so that all women are not judged to be demons—that is what the women are about in getting Beloved to leave 124....

The mothers are multiplied many times over, as are the breasts of the women in Eloe, Florida, who Jadine confronts in *Tar Baby*; against the demands of that immutable force of potential mother/goddesses, who seem to represent justice without mercy, Beloved can only retreat. The vengeance of parents punishing recalcitrant children is ultimately stronger than will or desire. But Beloved's retreat may in reality be a departure from a battlefield where she has won, accomplished what she set out to do.... Reduced to irrationality engendered by the wiping out of eighteen years of her life, Sethe is not the recalcitrant child, in need of correcting and nurturing. In this reading of the scene, Beloved can leave instead of being sent away because she has accomplished two things. First, she has caused Sethe to become temporarily deranged. Second, the result of that derangement is that Sethe acts without thought, instinctively, to save Beloved. What Beloved could not see as a 'crawling-already?' baby, she is now able to see as an adult: that her mother's action, many years before and in its current duplicate, was indeed one of love. This reading does not mean that the demon changes her nature, but that she achieves her desire: tangible evidence that her mother loved her best of all....

When Here Boy takes up residence again, that is the folklore signal that Beloved will not be returning. When Paul D finds the energy to pursue Sethe again, to experience the returning of sexual desire as well as a general concern for another human being, that is also a signal that Beloved will not be returning. Paul D's presence means health for Sethe, the opposite of what Beloved's presence meant.... Beloved goes from imagination to humanoid to legend, basically unchanged in her category as demon, the designation of Other that makes it impossible for her to be anything but eternally alone....

We might expect Beloved to act (and she does) in many ways like a demon—or a goddess—but Morrison makes it clear that Sethe's and Denver's intuitive powers, as well as the power of their voices, may also cross over the human/divine marker and become extranatural in what they can accomplish. This is also obviously the case with the women who drive Beloved out of 124; their voices combine in their power to fight the demon/devil, and who can wage such a battle successfully if not a divine/creative force? Not only do the women call upon God, but they also assume the power of godhead.... We are constantly encouraged to ask questions: 'Is Sethe right to kill Beloved? What would I have done under the same circumstances? Are some conditions of live worse than death? Morrison also draws us into active intellectual participation in the novel by challenging our beliefs about ghosts. In western societies, where we are taught that the demise of the body is the end of being in this realm, it is difficult to conceive of a ghost taking up residence in someone's home for more than a year....

By developing her novel associatively, that is, by narratively duplicating the patterns of the mind, the way it gathers tidbits of experiences in *seemingly* random fashion, she achieves a structural effect that evokes the process of oral narration.... Baby Suggs is the closest the novel comes to a traditional Christian world view, and she does not allow it to come very close.... While Baby Suggs is certainly in the tradition of being called, she points more to the folk imagination in her anointing than to biblical traditions. With the blessings of her community, she anoints herself out of her own experiences of suffering and shame.... Baby Suggs uses the *form* of religious rituals to impart secular advice.... Baby Suggs blends the best of the sacred and the secular worlds.... In her interactions with the crowds that gather in the Clearing (on *Saturday* afternoons, not Sunday mornings), Baby Suggs draws upon the call-and-response tradition informing almost all of African-American folklore....

With a few words, selectively chosen, Baby Suggs is able to offer a transcendent experience for those who believe in her voice. Baby Suggs becomes a communal poet/artist, the gatherer of pieces of her neighbors' experiences and the shaper of those experiences into a communal statement. Her role is in many ways like that of a ritual priestess. At appointed times, she summons the group, motivates it to action, and presides over its rites of exorcism; the pain and grief of slavery are temporarily removed in a communal catharsis. Having given up seven of her eight children to slavery, Baby Suggs knows what it means to have to put the heart back together after it has been torn apart valve by valve. As a medium who gives voice to unvoiced sentiments, Baby Suggs, like Claudia MacTeer, articulates what many of her people cannot.... As a holy woman, a sane and articulate Shadrack, an unselfish Eva, Baby Suggs uses her heart to become the heart of the community.... By denouncing her calling, Baby Suggs rejects the power of folk imagination, which has clearly served a constructive purpose for her and the entire community along Bluestone Road.... By abdicating her creative role, Baby Suggs descends from the legendary status that has defined her to become just another victim of slavery, a victimization all the more tragic because she clearly had the power not to adhere to such a fate....

Sweet Home—before the arrival of schoolteacher—is every slave's dream of how that intolerable condition can be made tolerable. Women are not raped, men are not beaten like mules; and Garner is willing to allow slaves to hire their time and purchase their families and themselves.... The mythical Sweet Home, then, assumes such proportions in direct relation to the memories of atrocities that spoiled its paradisiacal state. And these memories in turn shape the narrative structure of the novel.... Before the satanic schoolteacher arrives, Garner has clearly given unprecedented license to the slaves and has won the enmity of his neighbors. In designating his slaves men, he has violated the boundaries of master/slave interaction...

Sixo's solitude, occasional preference for nature over human beings, unusual behavior, and aura of derring-do bring to mind such folk figures as Big Sixteen and Stagolee. His spirit cannot be conquered even

if his body is destroyed. He is the ultimate man, as illustrated in his laughing during the burning death perpetrated against him by schoolteacher and his nephews. Schoolteacher may whip him, may burn him, may kill him, but Sixo still triumphs. He triumphs physically in laughing rather than howling in pain when he is lynched, and he triumphs spiritually in knowing that Patsy is pregnant with his child....

Mister, the rooster at Sweet Home, is an objectification of freedom and a metaphor for manhood. As the rooster swaggers around the barnyard, strutting for the hens present, he has more freedom and control over his existence than Paul D. As that freedom and sexual interplay get interpreted, Mister is also more 'man' than Paul D, more human—in the sense of having a separate, individual identity—than human beings who are slaves. In popular definitions of maleness, Mister is ultimately the 'cock' that Paul D can never become. It is that irony that makes the sight of Mister so painful for Paul D when he is wearing the iron bit in his mouth.”

Trudier Harris

“*Beloved: Woman, Thy Name is Demon*”

Casebook (1999) 129, 131-38, 144-49, 151, 153-54

“Morrison constructs history through the acts and consciousness of African-American slaves rather than through the perspective of the dominant white social classes. But historical methodology takes another vital shift in *Beloved*; history-making becomes a healing process for the characters, the reader, and the author. In *Beloved*, Morrison constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process. Sethe, the central character in the novel, describes the relationship between the individual and the historical unconscious.... Sethe’s process of healing in *Beloved*, her process of learning to live with her past, is a model for the readers who must confront Sethe’s past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right here where we live....

In *Beloved* Morrison, like Du Bois in *Souls*, negotiates the legacy of slavery as a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma as well. Both works challenge the notion that the end of institutional slavery brings about freedom by depicting the emotional and psychological scars of slavery as well as the persistence of racism. And both Morrison and Du Bois delve into the stories and souls of black folk to tap the resources of memory and imagination as tools of strength and healing. Morrison uses ritual as a model for the healing process. Rituals function as formal events in which symbolic representations—such as dance, song, story, and other activities—are spiritually and communally endowed with the power to shape real relations in the world. In *Beloved*, ritual processes also imply particular notions of pedagogy and epistemology in which—by way of contrast with dominant Western traditions—knowledge is multiple, context-dependent, collectively asserted, and spiritually derived. Through her assertion of the transformative power of ritual and the incorporation of rituals of healing into her narrative, Morrison invests the novel with the potential to construct and transform individual consciousness as well as social relations....

In *Beloved*, the reader’s process of reconstructing the fragmented story parallels Sethe’s psychological recovery: repressed fragments of the (fictionalized) personal and historical past are retrieved and reconstructed. Morrison also introduces oral narrative techniques—repetition, the blending of voices, a shifting narrative voice, and an episodic framework—that help to simulate the aural, participatory dynamics of ritual within the private, introspective form of the novel. In many oral traditions, storytelling and poetry are inseparable from ritual, since words as sounds are perceived as more than concepts; they are events with consequences. Morrison uses modernist and oral techniques in conjunction with specifically African-American cultural referents, both historical and symbolic, to create a distinctly African-American voice and vision that, as in Baby Suggs’s rituals, invoke the spiritual and imaginative power to teach and to heal....

The central ritual of healing—Sethe’s ‘rememory’ of and confrontation with her past—and the reader’s ritual of healing correspond to the three sections of the novel. In part one the arrival first of Paul D then of Beloved forces Sethe to confront her past in her incompatible roles as a slave and as a mother. Moving from the fall of 1873 to the winter, the second part describes Sethe’s period of atonement, during which she is enveloped by the past, isolated in her house with Beloved, who forces her to suffer over and over again all the pain and shame of the past. Finally, part three is Sethe’s ritual ‘clearing,’ in which the women of the community aid her in casting out the voracious Beloved, and Sethe experiences a repetition of her scene of

trauma with a difference—this time she aims her murderous hand at the white man who threatens her child....

The three phases of the reader's ritual also involve a personal reckoning with the history of slavery. In part one, stories of slavery are accumulated through fragmented recollections, culminating in the revelation of Sethe's murder of her child in the last chapters of the section. In part two, the reader is immersed in the voices of despair. Morrison presents the internal voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in a ritual chant of possession, while Paul D and Stamp Paid are also overwhelmed by the legacy of slavery. The last part of the novel is the reader's 'clearing,' achieved through the comic relief of the conversation of Paul D and Stamp Paid and the hopeful reunion of Sethe and Paul D. The novel concludes with Denver's emergence as the new teacher, providing the reader with a model for a new pedagogy and the opportunity for the reconstruction of slave history from a black woman's perspective....

Two ghosts impel the healing process in *Beloved*: Baby Suggs, holy, acts as a ritual guide, and Beloved, the ghost-woman, acts as a psychological catalyst for the three central (living) characters. The healing ritual in *Beloved* can be broken down into three stages. The first stage is the repression of memory that occurs from the trauma of slavery; the second stage entails a painful reconciliation with these memories; and the third is the 'clearing' process, a symbolic rebirth of the sufferer. Baby Suggs provides a moral background for the first stage and a ritual model for the last. Beloved embodies the second stage, compelling the characters in her 'family' to face all the pain and shame of their memories.

In *Beloved* the ritual methods of healing, of initiating the participant/reader, and of interpreting the world are represented by the lessons of Baby Suggs, whose spiritual power has earned her the appellation *holy* among her people. Baby Suggs conducts rituals outdoors in the Clearing, a place that signifies the necessity for a psychological cleansing from the past, a space to encounter painful memories safely and rest from them.... The metaphor of 'clearing' suggests the process of bringing the unconscious memories into the conscious mind and, thus, negotiating and transcending their debilitating control. Morrison also uses African and African-American rituals to facilitate the psychological cure, suggesting that African religious ritual provides an antecedent for the psychoanalytic method and that Freudian theories are modern European derivations from long-standing ritual practices of psychic healing. The healing ritual combines Christian symbolism and African ritual expressions, as is common in the African-American church. In the spiritual context, the metaphor of 'clearing' suggests a process of cleansing and rebirth....

Baby Suggs is the moral and spiritual backbone of *Beloved*. Her morality is based on a method of engagement and interpretation rather than on static moral dictates. The most significant difference between Baby Suggs's version of spirituality and that of the white religions depicted in the novel is her disdain for rules and prohibitions to define morality, as well as her rejection of definitions in general. Her actions contrast with those of white men like Mr. Bodwin's father, a 'deeply religious man who knew what God knew and told everybody what it was'....

Baby Suggs represents an epistemological and discursive philosophy that shapes Morrison's work, in which morality is not preset in black and white categories of good and evil... The only character in *Beloved* who represents a moral absolute of evil—the unnamed 'schoolteacher'—is an embodiment of the wrong *methods*. Schoolteacher, the cruel slaveholder who takes over Sweet Home after the death of the 'benevolent' slaveholder, Mr. Garner, has interpretive methods that are the opposite of Baby Suggs's. Rather than an engagement of the heart and imagination, schoolteacher's pedagogical tools are linguistic objectivity and scientific method. His methods are shown to have devastating effects.... Morrison depicts schoolteacher's pedagogical and interpretive methods as morally bereft, and through him she condemns not only slavery but also the United States' educational system.... According to Baby Suggs's morality, good and evil are undefinable, not based on absolute knowledge; they are part of a situational ethics....

Because the white people don't know 'when to stop,' as Baby Suggs says, slavery pushes the limits of the human capacity for suffering. The overwhelming pain of the past necessitates a closing down of memory, as it does for Sethe, who 'worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe'.... Baby Suggs is already dead when the novel begins, but her ritual in the Clearing is a model of the process of healing that Paul D and Sethe must undergo to free their hearts from the pain and shame of the past....

Beloved is both the pain and the cure. As an embodiment of the repressed past, she acts as an unconscious imp, stealing away suppressed memories and emotions. In a sense she is like an analyst, the object of transference and cathexis that draws out the past, while at the same time she is that past. Countering traumatic repression, she makes the characters accept their past, their squelched memories, and their own hearts, as beloved.

Beloved is an incarnation of Sethe's baby girl and of her most painful memory—the murder of her daughter to protect her children from slavery. Beloved is Sethe's 'ghost,' the return of her repressed past and she forces Sethe to confront the gap between her motherlove and the realities of motherhood in slavery. But Beloved is also everyone's ghost. She functions as the spur to Paul D's and Denver's repressed pasts, forcing Paul D to confront the shame and pain of the powerlessness of a man in slavery, and enabling Denver to deal with her mother's history as a slave. Beloved initiates the individual healing processes of the three characters, which subsequently stimulate the formation of a family unit of love and support, in which the family members can provide for each other in ways that slavery denied them. And Beloved is the reader's ghost, forcing us to face the historical past as a living and vindictive presence. Thus Beloved comes to represent the repressed memories of slavery, both for the characters and for the readers....

Morrison succeeds in creating more in her novel than a sense of history; she makes the past haunt the present through the bewildered and bewildering character of Beloved. Beloved also develops as a character, from a soft, voracious baby-woman to her final form as a beautiful pregnant woman. During the ritual in which she is exorcised the women see her at last: 'The devil-child was clever, they thought'... Beloved embodies the suffering and guilt of the past, but she also embodies the power and beauty of the past and the need to realize the past fully in order to bring forth the future, pregnant with possibilities.... Morrison resurrects the devil-child, the spiteful, beautiful, painful past, so that Beloved—and the novel—will live on to haunt us.... The trickster has long been a part of African and African-American storytelling. Most recently in African-American literary criticism, the trickster has been evoked as a deconstructive force in culture and in texts, as in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s version of the signifyin(g) monkey.... In *Beloved*, Sixo, the African slave, combines this role of the trickster with the image of the heroic slave who resists slavery to his dying breath....

Sethe's attempts to prove her love to Beloved and gain Beloved's forgiveness nearly destroy Sethe. Beloved is the murdered child, the repressed past, Sethe's own guilt and loss, and so Beloved can never forgive Sethe. But the former slave women understand the context within which Sethe acted; they shared in many of her miseries. And so her fellow sufferers come to her aid to exorcise the ghost of her past preying on her life, because Beloved is in some sense their ghost, too. Another local woman, Ella, had also killed her child, although it was not out of love... In the chapter in which Sethe kills her baby, the imagery is from the Book of Revelations, beginning with the apocalyptic image of the four horsemen and concluding with a sense of doom and judgment....

The women's voices carry Sethe from the apocalyptic end to a new beginning. But in contrast to the Gospel of John, which begins, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' The women bring Sethe to a beginning of voices without words. Just as Baby Suggs rejected religious dicta, the spiritual power of the purgation ritual lies beyond the meaning of words, in sound and sensation rather than in logical meaning and the Logos. The exorcism of Beloved is a purgation ritual, a baptismal cleansing and rebirth, and a psychological clearing....

Sethe's ritual and her memories are Morrison's story, a story that—like the voices of the women—reaches beyond meaning to the unconscious pains of the past. Morrison's story combines the creative and cleansing power of the women's voices surrounding Sethe, as well as the spiritual power of Baby Suggs and the disturbing power of Beloved, to construct the story as a ritual both healing and painful for the reader. Finally, Sethe's daughter Denver represents both the future and the past: Denver will be the new African-American woman teacher, and she is Morrison's precursor, the woman who has taken on the task of carrying the story through the generations to our storyteller.... Denver's love for Beloved forces her to confront the past she hates.... Without knowledge of her mother's past, Denver must remain in isolation from history and from her position in the world that can only be understood through history....

Denver does not fully remember her past and her mother's past until she undergoes a 'ritual of mergence' in part two of the novel. Four chapters in the middle of part two form a ritual of mergence and possession for Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. These four chapters emerge from the minds of the three characters, who are left alone after Paul D is gone. Sethe has recognized Beloved as her baby girl and is submerged in her attempt to prove her love and atone for her murder, while Denver tries to stay inside the intense circle of possession Sethe and Beloved have created. In the first three chapters, Sethe first proclaims her possession of her daughter Beloved, then Denver of her sister Beloved, then Beloved of her mother. The fourth chapter is in the form of a poetic chant, in which the memories and minds of the three combine in a mutual song of possession—'You are mine.' While Denver is possessed by the past she remembers everything—her own past and her mother's past, her fear of her mother as a child murderer, and her imaginary reunions with her father. The ritual of possession breaks through her isolation and grants Denver an experience of the past that can lead her into the future. After the winter of possession, Denver decides she must leave the house to save her mother from madness and from the ravenous Beloved....

Denver's position parallels the reader's in her historic relation to her mother's past. But Denver also takes on another role by the end of the novel—that of the teacher, the historian, and the author. Denver will become a schoolteacher, taking up the educational task from her teacher, Lady Jones and Baby Suggs, and taking over the tools of literacy and education from the white schoolteacher... 'Nothing in this world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher.' But this is the very reason that Denver must usurp schoolteacher's position; she must take away from him the power to define African-Americans and make their history in a way that steals their past, their souls, and their humanity. Denver is Morrison's precursor, the historian with her roots in African-American history and culture...With the knowledge of this cautionary tale, Denver points the way to a recovery of literacy, one that is suspicious of white definitions and discourse, and one that uses the African oral and cultural heritage and African-American values to take over the task of African-American history-making.

In *Beloved* Morrison brings together the African-American oral and literary tradition and the Euro-American novel tradition to create a powerful and intensely personal representation of slavery in America. In this way, Morrison indirectly critiques historical and pedagogical methods prevalent in the United States. She counters a fact-based objective system with a ritual method, based in initiatory and healing rituals, in which the acquisition of knowledge is a subjective and spiritual experience...Like Sethe, Morrison proceeds circuitously toward the revelation of this central secret. Morrison's circularity and indirection correspond to the process of healing undergone by Sethe, as well as to the depiction of the character of Beloved. Sethe's spinning motion around the room, around her subject, describes the necessity for approaching the unutterably painful history of slavery through oblique, fragmented, and personal glimpses of the past—that is, through means most often associated with fiction.

Beloved depicts a healing ritual, or 'clearing,' for Sethe, whose inability to confront her painful memories of slavery, and especially her guilt for killing her child, keeps her mentally and emotionally enslaved despite eighteen years of freedom. Morrison's fragmented revelation of Sethe's terrible act works to postpone the reader's judgment. By weaving together the complex and emotion-laden incidents and images of the past, Morrison situates Sethe's act within the historical and personal context of slavery.... The 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. The nature of repression makes this event indescribable—it is part of the inarticulate and irrational unconscious, like an inner ghost plaguing and controlling Sethe's life....

The hummingbirds suggest frenzy and confusion, as well as an unnatural event, signified by their beaks thrust into Sethe's hair. The hummingbirds also represent Sethe's physical urge for flight, and at the same time the small jewel-like birds signify Sethe's children—'all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful'.... The only escape from the threat of the white world is death. Sethe can never explain what she did because the event is outside of the logic of words and justifications, of cause and effect. Her act was a physical and emotional reaction, the culmination of her life up to that moment. Even her circling, repeatedly, around the subject with stories and contexts can never really reconstruct the moment, the event, that is beyond explanation.

Similarly, Morrison's novel reconstructs slave history in a way that history books cannot, and in a way that cannot be appropriated by objective or scientific concepts of knowledge and history. By inscribing history as a trickster spirit, Morrison has recreated our relationship to history in a process baffling and difficult but necessary. Through the character of *Beloved*, Morrison denies the reader analytical explanations of slavery. Instead, the reader is led through a painful, emotional healing process, leaving him or her with a haunting sense of the depth of pain and shame suffered in slavery.... In one reading, the story is not one to pass over. At the same time, the more evident meaning is intensely ironic—"This is not a story to pass on," and yet, as the novel shows us, it must be."

Linda Krumholz

"The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*"
Casebook (1999) 107-24

"It seems that all of her work in fiction has been leading up to this novel, and it is surely *Beloved* which helped her win the Nobel Prize. It is, in many respects, her most Faulknerian novel, not as a derivative but as her way of having learned from Faulkner's best work how to proceed to maximize her particular kind of surreality. *Beloved* is as much a meditation as it is a novel, what we recall from Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* in particular, but also *The Sound and the Fury*. It is this quality of meditation which gives Morrison's novel its density, its subtexture, and which makes it possible for her to unfold 'the secret' which lies at the center of her fictional idea. Such strategies continue in *Jazz*, her novel five years after *Beloved*. Without writing Mega-Novels, Morrison has surrounded her theme, the black as a displaced person. Given this, she has brought together social, political, ideological materials, and for that she needed narrative strategies, ways of unfolding and a central, overriding metaphor.

Child or infant murder—the Medea dimension—becomes the central trope, and the narrative strategy is to keep the trope hidden within layers of oblique, indirect language until the secret is uncovered by stages. Within the ideological frame of reference is the need to recreate slavery for the contemporary reader, and by so doing imply a commentary on contemporary black life. By framing everything in terms of the black as displaced person, Morrison has in this respect grafted Ellison's invisible man onto Faulknerian techniques for disguising, distorting, hiding. All of this is quite ambitious for a novel that is barely 100,000 words; but because Morrison has so surely captured her material in a narrative strategy, she is able to enclose it, like the Christo [Postmodernist "artist" who strung pink plastic fences across landscapes and wrapped big things in plastic] wrapping of a great monument.

The black as displaced person has always been implicit in Morrison's work, but here (and in *Jazz*), she explains it with her entire kit of devices. The displaced black fits nowhere, whether in his or her own community, whether in the north or the south, displacement leads to self-defeating behavior, even when there is a community. Morrison, in fact, pits the displaced black against her idea of community, and while the latter still has resonance, the individual—Sula, Son, others—heads into aberrant, or self-destructive behavior. The displacement, like Ellison's use of invisibility, is the central drama in black life, whether in post-slavery days as in *Beloved* or in more contemporary terms.

The strategies for presenting displacement hold the key to the success of Morrison's vision. In *Beloved*, she makes extensive use of prolepsis, or anticipation of events, another technique which recalls Faulkner. At the beginning of a chapter break midway through the novel, she writes: 'That ain't her mouth.' That mouth holds the key to a great mystery. The 'her' is unidentified until a friend, Paul D, says it is not Sethe's. But another friend, Stamp Paid, has showed this newspaper photo to Paul D in order to reveal what Sethe has done: that if it is her mouth, then she is the one who attempted to kill her children and did kill her baby. If it is not her mouth, then she is exonerated. Before Morrison reaches this point of disclosure, however, she tells us that a black's face appears in a newspaper only because of some unusual crime, not because of achievement. It is always negative news. Thus in the space of four and a half pages, there is considerable information. There is the anticipation of 'the secret'; there is the denial that it could be Sethe, the central female figure of the novel; there is the racial/ethnic point about blacks in the news; and then there is the slow revelation—still denied by Paul D—about the nature of the crime.

In this or similar ways, the entire matter of the novel is divulged. Prolepsis works, moreover, in several ways, not only as anticipation of events. It establishes a detective story atmosphere to the novel—what has

happened, who did it, and, finally, what were the motives? Further, it allows Morrison her way with language, which is indirect, oblique, somewhat off-center; so that a sur-real quality is achieved. This sur-real quality cannot be solely the result of language, but must gain its momentum from narrative; and that in turn derives from the proleptic nature of the material which intimates a terrible secret but then divulges it only in small increments.

We mentioned above Faulkner's early novels as possible quarries, but his midcareer novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, is of course the most compelling. Here the unraveling takes the form of ever-receding Chinese boxes, until one is drawn in through narratives and voices into a vortex where the configurations are blurred. The most telling 'secret' about black-and-white mixes is based on assumptions and speculations, on the 'what if,' and this works together with the language to create the sur-real or what some have called magical realism. Similarly, Morrison, working on a smaller scale, has enclosed the inner content in a constantly reshaping shell; so that the reality of the event, horrific as it is, becomes both more and less than real...

Prolepsis also works in matters of expansion and contraction, another one of Morrison's devices. Expansion is part of the revelation of the secret: the fact that something momentous lies at the center of the experience of Sethe and Paul D, as well as that of Sethe's now-grown daughter, Denver, and the spectral figure of Beloved herself. The very name Beloved anticipates something expansive, large, as of an angelic presence, a goddess in human form, or some other kind of deity appearing on earth as a sign of divine intervention. For Sethe, Beloved is the daughter whom she yearns to have; and for Paul D and his friend Stamp Paid, Beloved is a demonic figure, the doom that is seeking to bring down Sethe after all these years. The dimension of contraction comes in the very revelation itself; once revealed, the matter, while still horrific, is distanced and done away with—Sethe has served time in prison, the event past. The contraction keeps it 'beyond'; the expansion brings it to the fore, as Beloved in person and as Sethe's stricken conscience.

In her use of decentered language to accompany proleptic events and narrative voices, Morrison starts nearly every brief chapter with a sentence that runs askew to the material. 'When the four horsemen came—schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff—the house on Bluestone Road was so quiet they thought they were too late.' The relevance of this line—with its recall of the horsemen of the Apocalypse—to what has gone before is not clear. Clarity comes only when the scene turns back to the primal act, Sethe's killing of her baby, with the further intent to kill all her children to prevent their becoming slaves. Once again, the obliqueness of the language reinforces the slow revelation of the secret.

Beloved herself is part of the anticipatory element in the novel, since she turns up almost dead, and then slowly gets fat (and pregnant) later, a ghost or phantom who slowly takes over the essential household. She does not seem part of anything, until she begins to take on shape (physically and fictionally) as the replacement child who will bedevil Sethe even as she assuages her conscience. Under Beloved's subtle pressure, Sethe slowly deteriorates—she runs out of food, and her slide into hunger is an apt metaphor of the hunger she has felt after the murder of her baby. As part of her angelic mission, Beloved seems to fill, but she also empties, as part of her demonization of the household.

The elements finally cohere: child murder, the emergence of the secret, the presence of Beloved, the needs of Denver, the shifting past and present of Sethe; all caught in a sequence of tensions, metaphors, embodiments. Prolepsis enables Morrison to blend past and present more effectively than in any of her other novels, and this blending is essential to the narrative thrust. For if it is to mean anything, the novel must demonstrate the seamless nature of black life, from slavery through immediate post-slavery days, and, by implication, to the present. Prolepsis allows Morrison to imply, include, surround, and encompass."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1980-2000
(Xlibris 2001) 145-

"No novel of recent years has been more honored than Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The book received the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, and was a major reason for Morrison winning the Nobel Prize in literature five years

later--a distinction all the more striking when once considers that only three other native-born US writers earned this prestigious award during the second half of the 20th Century. More recently, *Beloved* trounced the competition in *The New York Times* survey of authors and critics to determine the best book of American fiction during the last twenty-five years.

But if the Nobel judges love Morrison, college professors love her even more. The Toni Morrison Society lists some 150 dissertations on the author, and enough academic articles to keep a graduate student in the library for years. I can't imagine another novel of recent years assigned by more teachers in more classrooms. Do a Google search on *Beloved* and 'syllabus,' and take a look yourself. *Beloved* is that rarity among contemporary novels: it was selling by the truckload even before Oprah gave it her stamp of approval.

Hence, one might assume that *Beloved* is the most canonical of modern novels, if not the foundation of the New Canon. Yet there is some heavy irony here, since *Beloved* might also be the first book picked for The Anti-Canon, the novels that upset the applecart of traditional literary canonization. As one commentator has noted, Toni Morrison is the Living Black Female to counter the Dead White Males who have long dominated literary studies.

Beloved also challenges the 'old school' standards by which novels have been evaluated--based on factors such as poetic writing, creative use of language, metaphor, etc. Yes, you can find these elements in *Beloved*, but they are a little beside the point. Morrison herself has admitted to getting 'annoyed at people who said there were poetic things in my writing.' In short, this novel goes hand-in-hand with post-colonial, post-patriarchal, post-Eurocentric attempts to restructure not just the priorities of fiction, but also the ways and means by which fiction is assessed and appreciated. Of course, the language of *Beloved* is poetic. Sometimes it is animated with the timeless force of myth and folklore; at other points it stretches out in longer phrases that circle in on a subject with Faulknerian indirection. Some of my favorite passages take on a sweeping Biblical tone. This final comparison is an apt one. The King James Bible is also poetic, but if you mentioned that to the most devoted fans of the Good Book, they would say that the poetry is a little beside the point.

For the most part--as the dissertations and articles makes clear--Morrison's readers look to her fiction primarily for the many ways in which it grapples with the issues of race, gender, sexuality and power. Morrison infuses each of these factors, moreover, with several layers of history, not just the antebellum and postbellum time periods in which *Beloved* is set, but also the earlier history raised in the book's epigraph 'Sixty Million and more,' referring to the black Africans who died in the Middle Passage. This past haunts the story, in a novel in which there are many hauntings, many ghosts hovering on the margins or moving into center stage.

All of these factors are set in play through the character Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, a black woman of extraordinary power. She is the 'one who never looked away,' as her daughter Denver describes her at one point in the book, and Sethe's fierce independence is the catalyst that sets off key elements in the narrative. Sethe nearly dies in her attempt to escape to freedom from the Kentucky plantation incongruously named Sweet Home, and join other members of her family in Ohio. The plot hinges on decisions she feels compelled to make, above all on how much she is willing to sacrifice not only to gain her own emancipation, but also to prevent her children from falling under the yoke of forced servitude.

Morrison's narrative is enriched by the roundabout way in which she unfolds this tale. The novelist once described to an interviewer her fascination with the 'moments of withheld, partial or disinformation' in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, and to some extent her storytelling here is similarly indirect. The central tragedy of *Beloved* is hinted at almost from the novel's start, but only in the sketchiest manner. Gradually Morrison circles in on the key elements of her plot, as a vulture circles on its prey, and with a tension that is heightened by the non-linear structure of her account. Morrison adds another twist by mixing magical and realistic elements into her story. As a result, some readers have tried to link her writing to the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Yet you could also look at *Beloved* as a post-colonial *Turn of the Screw*, only here the 'extra turn' of the screw is a much larger haunting that echoes down the generations--so much so that, as Sethe sees it, nothing ever dies, and the future is often 'a matter of keeping the past at

bay.’ In truth, echoes of many different strains of the American literary tradition--Southern Gothic, slave narratives, the macabre tales of the supernatural--can be traced in the pages of *Beloved*.

Not everyone has bought into the canonical status of this work. Stanley Crouch has argued that Morrison’s writing is too often interrupted by “maudlin ideological commercials” and that *Beloved* ‘reads largely like a melodrama lashed to the structural conceits of the miniseries.’ Crouch’s comments are (as so often with this critic) thought-provoking, and deserve to be part of the on-going debate and discussion surrounding this novel. On the other hand, trying to purge melodramatic and ideological elements from a book of this sort would be like trying to get the bloodshed out of a war novel, or the fight scenes out of a Jackie Chan movie. One suspects that these very elements have contributed in no small part to the success and appeal of this author.

In the final analysis, the importance of this book is no longer a matter of good or bad writing, and perhaps never was. For twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings, this is the book that spurred them into dialogues on race and gender and other thorny issues that still haunt our national debate just as the ghost of *Beloved* haunts Morrison’s novel. As such, this book will continue to loom large over current day American fiction. And it is testimony to the strength of the ‘canon’ that it can (once again) make room for such an anti-canonical work, and even give it a prized place at the head of the table.”

Ted Gioia
The New Canon.com (2014)

Michael Hollister (2014)