

Guney Y. Yildirim

Subject: *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

Rough Answer

Morrison sits us down with all sides of an infanticide case and tells us the story from multiple perspectives. In *Beloved*, the reader is compelled to sit in the jury seat and come up with his own verdict on the question of how a woman reacted to a cruel slave-owner's attempt to bring her and her children back to the slavery after she had savored the ecstasy of freedom for awhile, enough to distinguish between being in control of her own time and being controlled, oppressed, and tortured by all means, enough to recognize and protect "a place where you could love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire" (162). The verdict must be formed while and after having gone through densely, intensely knitted tales of individual worlds that call back different eras, conditions, emotions, and reasonings to the mind. Just how unreasonable, extreme, and criminal is killing one's own children when facing a life of slavery and brutality that is arguably any better than being killed? The book offers some subtle answers to this question. Most importantly, however, *Beloved* reminds us that it is all too naturally possible to exist and cease to exist in extreme fashions when facing extreme conditions. These extreme ways of beings and not beings include acceptance, resistance, compromise, co-existence, destruction and self-destruction.

Except for Paul D perhaps, everyone in the book is given plenty of time, "eighteen years" (173), to think over and over about what had taken place at 124 Bluestone Road. Although everyone seems to condemn her reaction as wrong and

unacceptable, they are also afraid to think about it passed beyond the fact that a mother killed her child. There were substantial circumstances to take into consideration. There was slavery and Seth certainly did not want to go back to it. Moreover, she decisively refused to see her own children go back to slavery. Slavery was loathed and slavery under Schoolteacher was the repulsion of life and Seth knew and felt the most immediate repulsion at the sight of Schoolteacher. Many of the people in the community were ex-slaves who fled the South. It was still a very possible occurrence that a group of slave-hunters could show up one day at their door to drag them back to the inhumanity, entirely stripped off of their own will and dignity. After having lived for themselves for some time, how easily were they going to accept the return to the slavery for the white men? How easily were they going to accept ceasing to be a man, a woman? How easily were they going to accept being a thing, an animal, without a will, without a heart...having to ask for permission to love?

It is not easy to condemn Seth for what she did. It could be said that Morrison's entire book is set to reevaluate the story to help determine what could be condemned and what could be justified in this patch of American history. The complicated and intertwined characteristics of black and white societies and of the destinies of individuals throughout the extraordinary times ask us to hesitate in laying down simplistic conclusions that are based on shallow analyses of the stories. Since Seth gave a "rough response to the Fugitive Bill"(171) and to the arrival of Schoolteacher, until Paul D arrived, 124 is recognized as a cursed house and its residents are driven out into the fences of 124, Denver bitter and playing alone and Seth working and

coming home alone. As the foundation to the community's banishing reaction to Seth's bloody response, Morrison identifies excess of pride in the way Seth carried herself. "Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably"(152). In an ever cautious and nervous community, excess in anything had an immediate impact of anxiety and the community impulsively sought self-correction. "The scent (...) of disapproval"(137) in the air that Baby Suggs smelled was the community's discomfort and anxiety with the excess in generosity. "Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess"(138). How could a former slave who just became free with the labor of her son have this much to show and share?

Upon the excess of generosity, the community finds Seth's over-reaction to the arrival of Schoolteacher and the resolute pride in the way she walks to the car and back and forth to Sawyer's all too shocking. It is all too alarming and disturbing to see such overkill consecutively in a Negro's behavior. They had taken refuge among the white communities of the North and they were nervously trying hard to prove to the entire world that Black folks can manage it on their own. Having "a Negro's face in a paper"(156) with the scandal of hand-sawing saw the head of her own child was not helping at all to the adoption of black folks as normal people capable of living on their own. Moreover, such an event is reminding them of their own dark sides with the history and they cannot predict what they might had done in place of Seth.

Morrison lays out the story in such a way that the individual's choice in the course of action and the community's influence on the individual when taking the decision become too intertwined and complex for the reader to explain it only by the

individual's action, its individual background and its consequences. Morrison places Seth's outrage and her expression of rage in the carefully chosen locations of the history and of the society at the time. Seth is a capable woman in the mind as well as being strong physically. She observes the transition from Mr. & Mrs. Garner's administration at Sweet Home to Schoolteacher's sophisticatedly cruel rule. She records how their destiny is so easily changed from one white hand to another and how the quality of their lives worsened solely at the will of a new ruler. Without a say on their own lives and nobody seems to be able to help them. She mentally and physically records the horrifying cruelties of Schoolteacher and his nephews. She runs away and she goes through thousand and one pain to get to Baby Suggs with her newly born baby. She arrives and takes deep delight at being with her children and being free. Then "twenty-eight happy days"(173) later they come to take her and her children back to hell. Still nobody seems to be able to help them. In fact, the community had held back from helping them by not warning them of the arrival of slave-hunters. They were too preoccupied with their resentment over the excess in generosity. Morrison subtly reminds us the following several questions throughout the pages: if Seth's reaction was extreme, then how acceptable is slavery, how normal is the community's fear and nervousness about their image before the eyes of white people, and how moderate is the agony of a re-slaved woman with her children, who has now tasted freedom and knows the horror of being a slave to Schoolteacher? If Seth's response was wrong and embarrassing for the community then how proud is the community with the fact that their image as seen by the white people is so frail that they are constantly nervous about it? How proud are they with

the fact that a group of slave-hunters could show up in their neighborhood and self-righteously snatch away members of their community or the fact that they cannot protect and secure the futures of their community members, a family made up of women and children, even in the North or the fact that it could be any of them who could any day be cornered by slave-hunters or the fact that they could not go back to the house, which they helped to ruin, to deal with the ghost of Beloved collectively, since she is of the past that belongs to them as well, and regain its remaining residents? Morrison stretches the time where the stories take place in and in the stretch of the time the distinction between what is embarrassing and what is honoring becomes a matter of capacity to re-memory what has been taking place in lives of individuals and in the life of the society as a whole.

Perhaps because they sense what is hidden in their memory, the community does not entirely banish the dwellers of 124. They are still allowed to live in that house as tenants. Seth was put out of the jail and allowed live with her children again. She is even hired at Sawyer's to work in the kitchen. Denver is allowed to go to school and play with the other kids until she realizes how the other kids regard her and what kind of question they have about her mother. However the community is stubborn on its head tossing with Seth's pride and does not make a step forward until Denver comes out with humility and asks for help.

When Paul D learns of the event, he insists that there could have a way. Some other way"(165). He cannot accept that a mother, the woman he knew since childhood, should not had resorted to slaughtering her own children. Paul D does not offer any concrete alternative as to what Seth could have done. She could not run

away. She could not chase them away. She could not fight them off. She could not negotiate with them. She could not reason with them. She did not want to go back with them. What could have saved her and the kids from that nightmare of a future? Is it less violent to go back to the slavery with all her four children? Is it less violent to watch yourself be put down, below no being should go? Is it less violent to watch your kids be slaves and be tortured and be put out of their humanity everyday? Should she have waited until the emancipation after the war? But then who is to say that it was all going to be better? Who could have seen that emancipation was going to happen? Was it not Paul D himself witnessing the sights of more dead (burnt and hanged bodies of Negroes) than alive after the war when he walked from Georgia to Delaware? Paul D had never allowed himself to love someone or something that thickly. After Sweet Home, he had been a homeless wanderer, prisoner, and a solitary man all his life. "Seth, me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow"(273), says Paul D, accurately describing the weight and intensity of their re-memory, and perhaps comprehending why Seth did not want her children to collect dark yesterdays in Schoolmaster's Sweet Home.

Morrison also emphasizes the difference in what men and women take into consideration when facing an extreme situation. We are always reminded throughout the book that Seth is woman, a loving mother and "it's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible"(165), says Seth when explaining to Paul D what and why he did. Paul D reminds her that "maybe there is worse"(165) but Seth knows what could be worse for her two little girls. "Anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim

you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up."(251) As a woman and veteran of such an experience, Ella weighed the developments with different eyes. Ella was a woman who "had been beaten every way but down"(258) and she too had killed what "she had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing"(258), a sight she preferred to destroy instead of having to look at the horror and repulsion that it was going to evoke before her eyes. It was Ella again who gathered other woman to march to 124, pray before the door, and claim Seth back from the ghost, whom Seth had tried to spare from the worse, from "the lowest yet"(259).

In the American folk history, Morrison opens up the folded pages and gives air and room to the characters and their tales, which are preferred to be forgotten by most. An infanticide case in Ohio twists into questioning of the attitudes of races, both black and white. It spills out of being an individual case to become an issue, the multi-layered resolution of which becomes a reference for everyone to reevaluate the distinction between arrogance and dignity, between extreme and matching up the challenge, and between right and wrong in the stretch of time.