Symbols of Trauma: A Mythological View on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

By Camille J. Tollbom

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to engage in a mythological discussion which enriches current scholarship regarding the title character of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. While major scholars suggest that Beloved as a character is either a solid ghost or—as Zora Neale Hurston suggests based on the quote “people who die bad don’t stay in the ground”—a reincarnation of Sethe’s infant who bore the same name, this paper seeks to complicate such notions, as neither of these theories account for Beloved’s dependence on and fascination with the river from which she arose nor for her fish-like qualities (Morrison 187). Additionally, neither of these explanations give a compelling reason for the timing of Beloved’s transformation between the two-year-old poltergeist Beloved and the solid, adult Beloved. In this paper, the significance of this transition within a mythological perspective, in which neither of Beloved’s various forms are human but rather cultural symbols, will be explained in detail in order to show how the forms in which Beloved appears reflect her mother Sethe’s struggle to cope with the slavery of her past. The argument here is significant because it powerfully argues for the persistence of historical trauma of slavery for African Americans, even, and perhaps especially, today.

Although many authors have sought to comment on the American institution of slavery in their works, few have done so as powerfully as Toni Morrison has in her classic novel, *Beloved*. The novel describes the experiences of Sethe, a former slave who commits infanticide in order to rescue her daughter from capture by Sethe’s former master, as she receives someone whom she supposes is her dead child, Beloved, back from the grave. The supposedly reincarnate Beloved
arrives shortly after her ghost has been exorcized from Sethe's house, appearing out of the river. At first, Sethe invites her into her family with joy, as if the presence of Beloved in her home makes up for the trauma that motivated Sethe to kill her as a baby. In the meantime, however, Beloved grows more and more monstrous, chasing out Sethe's family members as well as her lover, Paul D. Sethe's salvation from Beloved only comes when her living daughter, Denver, who was born free, gets help from the other freedwomen in their community, and the powerful and dangerous Beloved is effectively chased out of Sethe's life.

There has been a significant level of scholarly discussion developed pertaining to the symbolism of Beloved's character, including such theories as state that she is her mother's "memories," "the actual characterization of Sethe's torments," or some other sort of link to the past (Khaleghi 472). However, very little has been commented in terms of Beloved's various forms and what those might symbolize. Even Toni Morrison herself has not articulated fully on the subject of the ghostly transition, though she explains the physical form of Beloved by describing the African view of reincarnation in which "children or young people who die uneasily return out of the water in forms of members of your family" (Carabi interview). While it would be easy to assume Morrison's comment suggests that there is not much more to be discovered in Beloved's form, the dissatisfaction that readers have with this explanation must be addressed. After all, the Beloved of the story cannot only be explained as a family member from the water. On the contrary, she possesses too many uncannily supernatural qualities for the "reincarnated family member" idea to be a complete answer. Additionally, such an explanation ignores the question of timing: Why, after all, does Beloved show up in a physical form when she does? Thus, it can be assumed that both the transition and timing of the transition are key to understanding Beloved as both a character and a symbol. It is this gap in scholarship that this
paper seeks to fill, as understanding the relationship between Beloved's ghostly and physical forms broadens the character's symbolism and engrains her in the current struggle for racial equality.

Toni Morrison begins her novel, *Beloved*, with these foreboding sentences: “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom” (Morrison 3). Sethe’s address, 124, is here personified as spiteful, connoting that the house itself is ungrateful or hostile to her. The fragment following uses potent imagery to explain why the house is spiteful. The word “venom” conjures the image of a poisonous snake, shocking the reader in its attribution to a baby, a creature which would otherwise be thought of as harmless and endearing. This bond between the dangerous and the lovable characterizes much of the novel, as the readers must ask themselves, along with Sethe and her family, if the ghost that haunts 124 is worth keeping. Morrison complicates this question by transforming the ghost upon the arrival of Sethe’s old friend, Paul D. After Paul D banishes the invisible spirit from the house, the spirit, Beloved, arrives on the front lawn in the flesh, fully grown to her proper age. While readers might interpret this change in form as simply a new strategy with which Beloved can continue to haunt 124, its significance is not simply pragmatic. Rather, Morrison juxtaposes the ghost baby, the baby’s gravestone labeled “Beloved,” with a fleshly woman from the river named Beloved to comment on how African Americans continue to struggle with the trauma of slavery in different ways.

Beloved’s initial form fits the common European American mythology regarding the spirits of the dead. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ghosts are understood to be “immaterial...distinct from the body or the material part” of a person. It is important to note that, in mythology, being immaterial does not make a ghost unable to disturb or impact objects in the material world. Rather, its immateriality makes a ghost intangible to living beings and physical
objects. Additionally, French medievalist Jean-Claude Schmitt writes that, according to Western tradition, “if they appear... ghosts [are] the same age they had been and [appear] with the same features they had at the time of death” (Schmitt 195). The model thus breaks down into three characteristics: a ghost is immaterial if not invisible, a ghost does not age, and, if visible, a ghost has the same appearance as it had when it died. We can see how this model is used in the opening paragraph of the novel, where we learn that Sethe’s son Howard ran away because “two tiny hands prints appeared in the cake” (Morrison 3). Hand prints by definition indicate presence, as they must be created through the pressing of hands into an impressionable material.

Morrison’s diction regarding the size and source of the prints’ appearance point to a Western style of supernatural activity. The handprints “appeared,” the word “appear” connoting a derivation of existence from an unseen source. We are left with a nearly impossible image, that of a hand print without a hand, unless we conclude that the source of the hand print is invisible. Not only is the source invisible, but the prints are described as “tiny,” implying that the hands that formed them are tiny as well. The sudden appearance of two tiny hand prints necessitates the presence of two tiny invisible hands. Within the context of the opening scene, the reader can assume that the tiny invisible hands are attached to a tiny invisible body. The implied size of the ghost indicates that it has not aged since its death. In making the ghost of 124 remain the same age as when it died, as well as in making it invisible and largely intangible to the physical world, Morrison forms the spirit of Sethe’s maimed baby to the model of the Western ghost, a form which parallels Sethe’s relationship to her memories prior to Paul D’s reentrance into her life.

The adult Beloved who comes to 124 after Paul D arrives, however, reflects an entirely different mythology. As a creature, Beloved violates all three features pinnacle to the Western ghost. First, she is a fully grown woman, having aged at the same rate as she would have if she
had lived (Morrison 60). This also implies that she looks significantly different than she did at the time of her death, since then she was about two years old. Finally, she is material. She eats, drinks, and even spends a stint sleeping with Paul D (Morrison 148). Beloved does not resemble a ghost. When Beloved shows up, she is, for lack of a better word, alive. However, being alive does not make her fully human. Rather, Beloved inhabits the uncanny space between human and monster.

This is especially evident in her condition upon arriving at 124. When she shows up on a stump near 124, Beloved has walked straight out of the river. Because she is of the river, Beloved struggles to become accustomed to air and gravity. Her journey on the land is laborious, since “[everything] hurt but her lungs most of all” (Morrison 60). Even when she lies down in the house, she is still “breathing like a steam engine” (Morrison 64). The image of a steam engine complicates Beloved’s humanity in three ways. First of all, a steam engine uses water vapor to noisily power itself, producing a loud, low hissing sound. This sound image thus communicates that Beloved’s breaths are loud and ragged, suggesting that she may be unaccustomed to breathing air. Second, because a steam engine is powered by water vapor, it connotes the apparent contradiction that Beloved breathes because of the water vapor in the air rather than in spite of it. Third, by using a simile to compare Beloved’s breathing to a steam engine, which powers a steam boat, her breathing on land is as useless to her as a steam engine on land is useless to a steam boat, which ultimately requires a body of water to run. Beloved’s need for water is also evident in her unquenchable thirst, drinking “cup after cup of water” (Morrison 61). Another reason that Beloved has to lie down is that she struggles with gravity. When Denver asks her what is wrong, she murmurs “[heavy]...this place is heavy” (Morrison 65). In water, there is less direct gravitational pressure on the body. Beloved’s unfamiliarity with
air and gravity reflects a transition from her natural habitat, hinted at in her dramatic entrance: “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water” (Morrison 60).

So we see that though Beloved is not a ghost, at least not in the Western sense, she is certainly mystical. In fact, the creature she most closely resembles is the West African simbi, a water spirit. In his Study in Comparative Mythology, anthropologist Gary R. Varner describes how the legend of the simbi was “[carried] by the slave trade [as] an important cultural attribute of the South Carolina slave population...and showed up in the South Carolina Lowcountry in the early 1840s” (Varner 21). While we cannot know for sure which Africans knew the legend and which did not, its appearance does fit the setting and cultural context of the novel. Sethe is born in that time period, and although we do not know Sethe’s birthplace, she is born somewhere around that region, as she guesses that she was born in “Carolina, maybe? or was it Louisiana?” (Morrison 37). Thus, it is safe to conjecture that the simbi water spirit can be used to understand Beloved from a cultural angle. Moreover, the similarities between Beloved and the simbi water spirit are compelling. According to Varner, “[water] spirits are protectors, the guardians of bodies of water that give and renew life on the earth” (Varner 22). As we have already seen, Beloved comes from the water. The idea that a body of water is a place that gives and renews life is found elsewhere in the novel. For example, Sethe gives birth to Denver in a boat (Morrison 98). Also, Morrison spends a full paragraph describing two turtles mating in a river, while Beloved looks on, standing there with the hem of her skirt soaking in the water (Morrison 124). Though life-giving, Varner writes, water spirits have a dark twist to them in that “[their] punishments are swift and dreadful if their laws are broken” (Varner 22). Unfortunately for Sethe, Beloved’s laws are emotional and relentless. As Sethe becomes increasingly devoted to her, Beloved beats Sethe, “[accusing] her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not
smiling at her...Sethe [pleads] forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved [is] more important, [means] more to her than her own life” (Morrison 284). Regardless, Beloved continues her punishment, leeching off Sethe, leaving Sethe as small and fragile as Beloved was when she first showed up on the lawn, Beloved taking “the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling” (Morrison 309). By taking the shape of a pregnant woman, she steals from Sethe the most cherished and conflicted element of Sethe's identity, that she is a mother. This is the ultimate punishment. In all these ways, we see that Beloved is not unlike the simbi water spirit, thus connecting her to Sethe’s African roots and to slavery.

It must be addressed here, however, that there are other legitimate ways of reading Beloved's physical form. Though my research suggests that Beloved is largely mythical and not human, a reading which is both plausible useful for the sake of analysis, Beloved's relationship with the water could be simply Morrison's dramatization of African reincarnation in which, as was mentioned earlier, "young people who die uneasily return out of the water" (Carabi interview). Whether or not this guarantees Beloved's humanity, however, is highly questionable. After all, shortly after Morrison's statement about African reincarnation, she also states that "water is a dangerous and haunted place because spirits dwell in it" (Carabi interview). Although in the novel Sethe seems to assume that Beloved is her reincarnate daughter and not a spirit, the crux of the matter is that we cannot tell what Beloved is, because the water could produce either entity, and this is precisely what makes her character so haunting: she is either a dear child or a monster, and we do not know. The uncanny space in which her character abides is therefore less problematic than one would have originally assumed. Whatever the case, the physical form of Beloved reflects African, not Western, traits, though the space between human and simbi remains uncertain.
The difference between the cultural backgrounds of the baby ghost and the physical Beloved displays the change in Sethe’s cultural identity when Paul D moves in as well as how his presence causes her to relive in her memories many traumatic experiences from her time as a slave. Considering that the moment in which Sethe kills her child in order to protect her from slavery results in the baby ghost and the appearance of Beloved, both figures can be viewed as symbols of the trauma of slavery. However, before Paul D shows up, Sethe has learned to numb the pain of her memories. Even the ghost of her child is but a poltergeist, making mischief but remaining an abstract, invisible idea. Living with only Denver, she has no one to remind her of her past, her heritage, or her hardships. Thus it is appropriate that the ghost of her trauma lack any resemblance to her past, defaulting to the Western tradition rather than storing itself in her identity, where it hurts the most. The arrival of Paul D is the rock that begins the landslide. Every time they are together, whether they are eating dinner or talking on the porch or sleeping together, they become filled with memories. With his presence, Sethe must face her trauma in the flesh. It is therefore fitting that a West-African water spirit of her child visit her in place of the tiny ghost, Beloved's physicality symbolizing the reality of the past that she must face. A mythical creature of Sethe’s ancestors, Beloved is attractive because she too encourages Sethe to remember.

However, reliving trauma slowly destroys Sethe, and even after Beloved disappears, the trauma Beloved represents is the only thing to which Sethe can cling. Sethe cries to Paul D, "She was my best thing," as she lies down, waiting to die (Morrison 321). The happy ending finally comes with Paul D's answer. He refers to the flood of dark memories in which they have been engulfed, saying that they "got more yesterday than anybody [and]...need some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison 322). With the disappearance of Beloved, they are now both free to live in
the present, and even the future, rather than the past. In this way, Morrison contrasts Beloved's Western ghost with the tangible African Beloved from the river to demonstrate ways in which African Americans continue to wrestle with the brutality of history, even after the institution of slavery has been legally disbanded to some degree.

It is impossible to conclude this discussion without acknowledging its pertinence to current events. While some may argue that Morrison's novel is set on the borderlands of emancipation and therefore cannot be compared to the present time, such an argument ignores the fact that Morrison did not write *Beloved* in the 19th century but in her own generation, which is, more or less, our own. As open hostility against people of color continues to grow in the United States, I cannot imagine a message more valuable than that which awakens us to greater understanding of the history of slavery and its perpetuated effects on the lives of its descendents and those associated with them in this country. While it is easier for the privileged to live with the Western master narrative of race, a view which casts history aside in order to achieve some sort of quasi-"equality," such a view does not get rid of the ghost of the past, though it remains invisible to them. The physical, in the flesh, sublimely impossible to categorize African Beloved must be faced and cannot be argued out of existence once she appears. As Morrison herself once said, "There are certain things that are repressed because they are unthinkable, and the only way to come free of that is to go back and deal with them" (Carabi interview). Rather than seek to live "colorblind," a well-meaning idea which unfortunately removes acknowledgment and healing from the blaring issue, we must therefore face history in order to truly heal from it, whether we think it is a monster or not.
Works Cited


