“Every flower must grow through dust”
Anonymous (Aphids 2003)

Neglect... abuse... rage... murder... it sounds like the stuff of big budget, Hollywood horror movies, a perverted creation of a sick and twisted mind. But it isn’t. Welcome to the reality of life as a liberated slave in Nineteenth Century mid-west America. In Toni Morrison’s latest novel, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Beloved, the demons of a past colonial nightmare spring to life for the liberated black community, mingling past and present with the terrifying supernatural realm. Kate Simpson investigates further the world of Beloved, a cautionary narrative that deals with the nature of guilt, psychiatric disorders and the remarkable resilience of the human spirit.

For more than two centuries, the novelists of America have offered the literary world poignant, fresh, and very real accounts of the life and times of one of the greatest post-industrial nations of the world. With stories and styles as broad and varied as the continent from which they are born, America has indeed produced some of the finest literary authors of all time. Toni Morrison—the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature for her haunting portrayal of life in post civil war Cincinnati, Beloved—has certainly established herself as one of the most influential writers of the late twentieth century. An intimate portrayal of the lives of four liberated slaves in the mid-nineteenth century, Beloved offers audiences an intimate insight into the life of a woman who struggles with the concepts of physical and emotional emancipation; of a family broken in the most tragic of circumstances, with the death of a child.

The novel, Morrison’s fifth, critically examines the nature of the family, the nature of guilt and depression, and questions conventional notions of freedom, particularly in relation to the abolition of slavery in America’s mid-west. Weaving the past and present experiences of mother, daughter, lover and grandmother, Morrison’s masterful storytelling skills provide an intimate and chilling insight into the struggle for liberation, and the ferocity of love, guilt and jealousy experienced by those who long for physical and emotional freedom. Indeed, this novel aptly portrays the personal renaissance of the black slave women of America’s Midwest, proving that the struggle for emotional and physical freedom is fraught with disaster and tragedy.

An acclaimed African American author, Toni Morrison is celebrated for her poignant and harrowingly real portrayals of life in slavery and the constant struggle for emancipation (Goldner 1999, p.16). This novel is certainly no exception. Beloved, the partially biographical tale of the life of Margaret Garner (Parker 2001, p.1), centres on the life of Sethe, a black slave woman who suffered severe emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of her owners, her subsequent escape from Sweet Home plantation, and the tragic events that led to the death of her eldest daughter and the attempted murder of her remaining children. Abandoned by her two sons, and grieving the loss of her daughter and mother-in-law, Sethe flees wider society and vows to live the remainder of her life in seclusion with her surviving daughter Denver, the ghost of her slaughtered baby, and the guilt that emotionally cripples her. Sethe’s life changes tremendously with the arrival of Paul D, another ex-slave, and the apparition of a mysterious woman named Beloved, who Sethe and Denver believe to be the flesh version of the baby ghost. In a story spanning three decades, Beloved critically examines Sethe’s relationship with her family and wider society, and challenges the accepted notions of freedom, grief, and guilt. Indeed, through her relationships with Paul D, Denver, and the physical incarnation of her murdered daughter, Sethe learns to face the terror of her past and experiences a personal renaissance, washing away the indignities of her past and allowing her to begin a new existence.

In Beloved, slavery exists as an underlying evil, the core of black society’s troubles: something that shapes Sethe’s reality, linking her inescapable past to her uncertain future. Touching all of the characters in different ways, Beloved paints slavery as ongoing, inescapable and destructive; a force that goes beyond physical restraint to torture the emotional realm. As Sethe discovers, the lasting memories of her life at Sweet Home create a different form of slavery, one that captures the emotions and forms the constraints of guilt, jealousy, revenge and desperation fraught in her life. So deeply set are the physical and emotional scars of her experience, Sethe is unable to function in normal society, remaining instead a captive of her past:

I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running-from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, by let me tell you something Paul D Garner. it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much. (Morrison 1997, p.15)

Sethe’s moving words provide for the audience a very real insight into the tortured world of nineteenth century slaves, and their struggle for liberation in a world fraught with violence and racism. As individuals, Sethe, Baby Suggs and Paul D experience different versions of oppression beneath their colonial masters, enduring physical, emotional and sexual abuse. The residue of these experiences, combined with the homogenising aspect of slavery—the ‘owned’ are denied their individuality, community and sacred spaces—lingers long after the end of physical slavery, creating eternal nightmares and enduring social dysfunction. Further, the nature of slavery demonstrated in Morrison’s text can be isolated as the key underlying cause of the fragmentation of the freed black community, Sethe and Paul D’s isolation from the community, and, most importantly, the murder ‘crawling already’ girl.

In Beloved, as the cornerstone of the deeper issues of the self, the community, and the family, Morrison pinpoints slavery as the primary cause of the social disharmony rife in the liberated black Cincinnati community to which Sethe, Baby Suggs and the children flee. According to Elliott (2000, p.181), the colonising discourse so firmly embedded in the psyche of emancipated slaves prevents them from properly embracing freedom. This is further supported in Morrison’s text by Sethe’s reminiscence of life with Baby Suggs during her twenty-eight days of freedom. Freeing yourself was one thing: claiming ownership of that freed self was another (1997, p.95). While recognised formally as freed slaves no longer physically bound to the colonial system, the failure of society to re-educate and, to a greater extent, re-socialise the black community had prolific consequences for individuals, leaving them with a quasi-freedom where the lingering colonial psyche voids physical freedom, creating a sense of confusion and isolation from wider society.

Elliott argues that, in order to escape the damaging discourses of servitude, dependence and oppression, the whole community must embrace and support the individual in their search for personal identity and self worth (2000, p.186). In Sethe’s case, complete freedom from her past, littered with incidences of rape by Schoolteacher’s nephews (Morrison 1997, p.16), abuse at the hands of her master (Morrison 1997, p.227) and the premature loss of her mother (Morrison 1997, p.61), can only be achieved with the help of the wider free black community. In the text, Morrison makes much of Sethe’s twenty-eight days of ‘true’ freedom, a period that Elliott (2000, pp.186-88) believes was too brief to fully recondition Sethe, leaving her with only a fraction of the support and sense of community others experienced. Elliott believes that the isolation from the community profoundly affected Sethe, rendering her unable to fully adjust to a liberated lifestyle. Jesser (1999, p.337) supports Elliott’s argument, stating that 124 Bluestone’s ostracism from the potentially healing community directly contributes to the cataclysmic event of ‘crawling already’ girl’s death, an action that profoundly affects its residents; transforming Sethe from a partially liberated state to a completely isolated, socially catatonic existence. By its very nature, slavery internalises the notions of servitude and inferiority, creating a powerful cycle that, even in the event of liberation, is difficult to overcome. For Sethe, sudden freedom from her colonial bonds provides its greatest challenge in learning to trust others and love her family—luxuries she could not indulge in during her years of enslavement:

For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love... The best thing, she knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or...
However, the support of the wider liberated community, when administered properly over an extended period of time, helps individuals to escape from its incapacitating mentality, allowing them to fully embrace freedom. As Morrison’s text shows, however, the loss of community at this crucial time leads to the further emotional isolation of the individual. Indeed, as Sethe struggled to overcome the freedom gained through her escape from Sweet Home, the withdrawal of support from the liberated black community caused further damage to her psyche and contributed to the justification of her daughter’s murder.

Koolish (2001), reading Beloved from a psychological perspective, takes Elliott and Jesser’s arguments further, claiming that the supernatural and personal elements of the novel are related specifically to the main character’s experiences of slavery and community, and their battle with psychiatric disorders. For Sethe particularly, a lifetime of torturous enslavement followed by the ostracism from the emancipated black community leaves her desperate and hurting, longing for resolution and ‘real’ freedom (Koolish 2001, p.173). For the characters of Beloved, a long period of exposure to the slave mentality leaves them with the hallmarks of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a psychiatric condition that produces symptoms detrimental to the physical, emotional and social health of the individual (Koolish 2001, p.179). For Sethe, as the main character, Morrison has deepened the long term effects of slavery and abuse, writing into her the symptoms of Multiple Personality Disorder that allow her to exit her normal realm of consciousness and murder her daughter. Parker (2001, p.3) supports Koolish’s claims of Sethe’s mental illness, stating that psychiatric disorders such as those Morrison has demonstrated in her characters, referred to by Parker as incidents of ‘hysteric’, can be directly traced to the experiences of slavery and isolation from society. Using this reading of Morrison’s text, Koolish and Parker argue that Beloved’s character serves as both a symptom of Multiple Personality Disorder and as a real person who also exhibits symptoms of hysteria.

The depth and range of Morrison’s masterful storytelling ability is aptly demonstrated in her ability to create a cohesive story told in fragmented portions. The presence of Beloved, as a gothic character, serves to disrupt the flow of linear time in the novel, and leads to the entwining of lengthy passages of black history and present reality (Goldner 1999, p.62). Furthermore, with its constantly changing narrative style, where the stories of past and present are told by various characters, and its disregard of more conventional linear chronology, Beloved would certainly lose its audience in the richness of the narrative if it were not for vehicles like the chokecherry tree and the faded patchwork quilt, used to assist the flow of the novel. While it can be argued that the presence of the ever-changing ‘chokecherry tree’ covering Sethe’s back helps readers to align the fragmented sections of Beloved, Daniel concludes that the most useful vehicle provided by Morrison is the presence of Baby Suggs’ patchwork quilt (2000, p.323). Serving as a source of comfort for each of the key characters at some stage in the text, the prominence of the quilt in all of the significant events in the novel – from Baby Suggs’ death (Morrison 1997, p.38) to the arrival of Beloved (Morrison 1997, p.54) – and the mention of its physical deterioration over the decades clearly confirms its importance to the text. As Daniel (2000, p.325-27) points out, the quilt also metaphorically symbolises the piecing together of the decades and life experiences of the family’s journey toward liberation, bringing the main characters together through the establishment of concrete bonds.

In academic discussion about Beloved there is much debate surrounding the character for which the book was named. Unlike others in the novel, Beloved does not have an individual identity or personality, and displays several qualities that intrigue and frighten the residents of 124 Bluestone. While Morrison makes it clear in the text that Beloved’s human incarnation possesses both real and supernatural qualities, the deliberate vagueness of her identity, personality and physicality challenges the reader to embrace the character not as a fully ‘human’ being, but as an indefinite creature that provides a powerful force in the novel. Varied readings of the text naturally yield numerous valid interpretations of Beloved’s nature, ranging from the traditional opinions that Beloved is either a flesh version of Sethe’s murdered daughter or a sexually molested slave girl unrelated to the original story (Elliott 2000, and Goldner 1999, p.72), to the more unconventional claims that Beloved is a flesh incarnation of one of Sethe’s many personalities (Koolish 2001, p.178). Despite the obvious confusion over Beloved’s identity, each author concludes that this point is far less important than her contribution to the lives of the other characters. Spirit or flesh, Beloved’s very presence acts as a catalyst for change and confrontation amongst the liberated black community, challenging Sethe, Paul D and Denver to collectively confront and lay down their past experiences, enabling them to happily embrace physical and psychological freedom (Goldner 1999, pp.75-6). While the precise role of Beloved, by nature of her characteristics, is difficult to pinpoint, she clearly is the axis of the family’s story, and proves useful both as a means of examining characters individually and evaluating the beliefs and actions of the wider community.

Beloved, an elaborate and touching masterpiece that pays tribute to the African American communities of the Nineteenth Century, provides a fascinating and disturbing insight into the experiences of trauma, guilt and grief. In its representations of slavery, community and the supernatural, Morrison’s text lovingly recounts the story of a tortured and isolated family, demonstrating the remarkable resilience of the human spirit and providing modern society with a better understanding of the greater physical, emotional and social scars that stem from oppression and hatred.

Reference List:


