

Rationale: Beloved

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage, 1987, 2004.

Suggested grade levels: grades 10-12; American Literature (Advanced Placement or Honors).

In her introduction to *Beloved*, Toni Morrison explains her purpose in writing the novel:

In trying to make the slave experience intimate, I hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive (xix).

Beloved begins in 1873 at 124 Bluestone Road, just outside Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sethe and her only remaining child, Denver are living in a haunted house. The house is “spiteful” (3) due to the ghost of Sethe’s murdered child who rattles dishes, breaks mirrors, attacks the dog, and puts her fingers in the cake, chasing off Sethe’s two sons Howard and Buglar.

The story of Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is also revealed early in the novel. Though she has already died in the opening chapters, her presence is palpable in the house (near the end, she even gives advice to Denver). Baby Suggs’ freedom is bought for her by her son Halle, and she already lives at the Bluestone Road house when Sethe escapes. Baby Suggs’ home at first is a central location for those escaping slavery, and she suggests that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (103), and for this reason they must love their flesh, and “love [their] heart. For this is the prize” (104). Only after her son does not return and she watches as Sethe tries to kill her own babies, the white slave catchers having violated the safety of her home, does Baby Suggs take to her bed and die, realizing, “There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” (105).

With the return of Paul D., a former slave at Sweet Home, the plantation from which Sethe had escaped some 20 years before, the “Baby Ghost” is chased from the house, and Sethe, Denver and Paul D. attempt to make a life together. Paul D’s arrival and the exorcism of the Baby Ghost coincide with the arrival of a strange young woman named “Beloved.” Paul D and Beloved begin a cycle of memories (or “rememories” (43)) about past events that Sethe would rather forget. An important theme of the novel is how forgetting the past can do damage to people and communities, while remembering can be a painful and even dangerous process. Beloved seems to feed on the memories of her own infancy (she remembers things no one could: a pair of earrings Sethe once owned, a lullaby Sethe sang her, and most strangely, the Middle Crossing from Africa).

Paul D., on the other hand, reminds Sethe of her life and escape from Sweet Home. Beginning with the scar on her back that resembles a “choke cherry tree” and working through the murder of her child, and the heinous rape by Schoolteacher and his nephews, each memory unfolds like a mystery, or like a shattered mirror in which each shard reflects a fragment of the entire picture. Sethe resists remembering, but Beloved, Denver and Paul D. all cause her to tell and “rememory” each piece of the story: moving slowly toward the most painful and graphic memories.

When the memories are pieced together, a sort of circular series of interlocking realizations and recurrences unfold. Paul D. learns of Sethe’s murder of her child, Sethe and Denver discover Beloved is the murdered child and sister, Baby Suggs realizes that whitepeople are bad luck and can take what they want, Denver realizes she must save herself and her mother

by seeking relationships with the community, and the community realizes they must forgive Sethe for her alleged pride. And at the center of these realizations and memories is the brutal beating of Sethe and the stealing of her milk, all part of Schoolteacher and his nephew's attempts to quantify the Sweet Home slaves between their "animal" and "human" characteristics. The very brutality that leads Sethe to kill her own child, rather than have her returned to slavery.

Despite the violence of the memories (the violence evoked by slavery) the novel ends with several acts of redemption. Denver leaves 124—the house haunted by Beloved—seeking help, relationships and food for herself and her mother, taking the first steps in breaking, not only the power of Beloved, but the power of the fear of "whitepeople." The community, in return, realizes that the past (in the form of a ghost) has taken control of Sethe and her house. They come to sing and pray for her, allowing Sethe to break the cycle of killing violence and to escape Beloved's devouring love.

Beloved is rich in structural complexity and symbolism. Natural symbols such as trees (Sethe's "choke cherry" scar, Denver's box elder bushes, and the trees on Sweet Farm plantation) illustrate the contrast between the beauty and brutality of the natural world and the world of slavery. A haunting central section of the novel evokes the suffering of the Middle Passage, relating it imagistically to hell and the grave.

Structurally the novel unfolds as a written memory, with forgotten details triggering further memories. Used in a writing unit to explore memory as a written trope, *Beloved* serves as a central text among shorter works in which writers write and structurally represent the process and function of memory.

Because the novel is based on the actual events of the life of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who killed one of her own children, it can also be read in conjunction with nonfiction slave narrative accounts of the time, serving as a dramatic and imaginative supplement to historical study. In *The Modern Medea*, a nonfiction account of the events surrounding Margaret Garner, Steven Weisenburger attests that Morrison's novel "insists that slavery as a whole constituted a historical trauma whose forgetting has put a people's collective sanity in chronic peril" (10). Morrison also gives voice to the slave mother, who would not normally be given a voice, and through the character of Beloved "symbolizes the century-long amnesia about slaves' lived experiences," and "also represents everything that cannot be *recaptured* through historical analysis, everything that cannot be summarized so that we can claim it as *our* history" (10). She has removed the objectivity of the history to make the story come alive.

The Kid's Right to Read Project speaks to the literary merit of the novel, noting that *Beloved*:

... addresses the harsh realities of slavery and weaves together the memories of an escaped slave's plantation days with the narrative of her struggles during Reconstruction. Margaret Atwood, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, notes that "[t]hrough the different voices and memories of the book... we experience American slavery as it was lived by those who were its objects of exchange, both at its best - which wasn't very good - and at its worst, which was as bad as can be imagined." Confronting difficult themes in literature like those presented in *Beloved* is part of the educational mission of the AP program.

In addition, *Beloved* is widely recognized as a work of significant literary and artistic merit, for which it has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize; and, in 2006 named the "best work of American fiction of the last 25 years" by the *New York Times Book*

Review. In addition, author Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 for her collected works, and her writing has been called part of the "canon" of American literature. *Beloved* is widely taught in high schools and colleges around the country. Indeed, the school district would potentially put its students at an educational disadvantage in college if it did not introduce them to literature of this sort in high school.

Some of the challenges of the novel include its complex structure, the violence of slavery and infanticide, coarse language, and sexuality. Given sufficient guidance, students find the challenge of the structure gratifying, as the story unfolds. The ambiguities of the text provide for valuable discussion, and the important realization that texts can have various interpretations and meanings. The violence of slavery and the infanticide are interconnected, one leads to the other. Certainly Morrison's purpose of making "the slave experience intimate" (xix) can only be achieved as the reader understands the individual pain experienced by one character (Sethe) and the concentric circles of pain that emanate from her experience. Slavery was in fact violent, and its destructive effects reach beyond the past of the plantation and into the present. One of the redemptive qualities of the novel is that it moves the reader from asking, "How could a mother destroy her child?" to the deeper question, "How could America destroy its children?"

Furthermore, any difficulties of the text should be considered in the context of the expected maturity of advanced level, English 11 Honors students. The English 11 Honors course leads into the AP English 12 course which has approval of The College Board. Students in the AP course are tested by The College Board, and curriculum in the course must meet AP as well as local and state criteria. *Beloved* has been a staple of Honors and AP classes, and has appeared as a choice on the AP open response question six times in the past ten years.

Alternate Texts

Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1989.

This novel has similar themes to *Beloved* especially regarding memory. It also has a non-linear chronology and imagery that is central and powerful.

Butler, Olivia. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.

This novel explores similar themes to *Beloved* regarding the effects of slavery, but does not provide the same complexity of structure and narrative technique that are beneficial to the Honors/AP level student.

Reviews

From: The New York Times Review of Books

Toni Morrison is not just an important contemporary novelist but a major figure in our national literature.

From: Amazon.com Review

Beloved is a dense, complex novel that yields up its secrets one by one. As Morrison takes us deeper into Sethe's history and her memories, the horrifying circumstances of her baby's death start to make terrible sense. And as past meets present in the shape of a mysterious young woman

about the same age as Sethe's daughter would have been, the narrative builds inexorably to its powerful, painful conclusion. *Beloved* may well be *the* defining novel of slavery in America, the one that all others will be measured by. --*Alix Wilber*

From: Library Journal

Powerful is too tame a word to describe Toni Morrison's searing new novel of post-Civil War Ohio. Morrison, whose myth-laden storytelling shone in *Song of Solomon* and other novels, has created an unforgettable world in this novel about ex-slaves haunted by violent memories. . . . A fascinating, grim, relentless story, this important book by a major writer belongs in most libraries. Ann H. Fisher, Radford P.L., Va. Copyright 1987 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From: African American Literature Book Club

At the center of Toni Morrison's fifth novel, which earned her the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, is an almost unspeakable act of horror and heroism: a woman brutally kills her infant daughter rather than allow her to be enslaved. The woman is Sethe, and the novel traces her journey from slavery to freedom during and immediately following the Civil War. Woven into this circular, mesmerizing narrative are the horrible truths of Sethe's past: the incredible cruelties she endured as a slave, and the hardships she suffered in her journey north to freedom. Just as Sethe finds the past too painful to remember, and the future just "a matter of keeping the past at bay," her story is almost too painful to read. Yet Morrison manages to imbue the wreckage of her characters' lives with compassion, humanity, and humor. Part ghost story, part history lesson, part folk tale, *Beloved* finds beauty in the unbearable, and lets us all see the enduring promise of hope that lies in anyone's future.

Resources

Doyle, Robert P. *Beloved*, Toni Morrison. 2007 Banned Books Resource Guide ALA Website.

Kid's Right to Read Project. Joint Letter to Jefferson County Superintendent about Removal of *Beloved* from High School English Classes. National Coalition Against Censorship 30 March 2007 <http://www.ncac.org/literature/20070330~KY-Louisville~Joint_Letter_To_Jefferson_County_Schools_Superintendent_Beloved.cfm>.

Weisenburger, Steven. *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child Murder from the Old South*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998.