



Personalized History: Modernist Techniques, Memory, and Social Conscience in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's most famous novel, *Beloved*, has been rightly considered a scathing critique of American slave history in the nineteenth century. Most assessments of Morrison's novel focus on the contents of the story and not much on the techniques and structure of the writing. However, Morrison knew much about modernist narrative techniques and employs nearly all of them to rewrite the history of slavery in the U.S. These modernist techniques provide Morrison the means of turning the major historical events and circumstances of multitudes into personal histories of triumph and failure, and thus give the reader a sense of what it felt like to be ensnared in these movements of history.

Keywords

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, modernism, Afro-American literature

In the second half of the twentieth century, the techniques developed by the literary modernists of the first half of the century had come to be part of the repertoire that any writer could use for any purpose. Toni Morrison's novel of the lives of American slaves both during and after slavery, *Beloved* (1987), is written very much in the modernist style, displaying the influence of the writers who had been the subject of Morrison's master's thesis, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. The novel is highly impressionistic, with every event squeezed through some character's perception. As a third-person narrator, Morrison selects which bits of which impressions the readers get, and in what order they arrive, but Morrison never expressly comments in her own voice or uses a distinct narrative voice to prod the readers into thinking certain ways about the content. The rhetorical or persuasive effects of the novel come from the material selected for presentation and the order of the presentation. Morrison uses the techniques of modernism to rewrite the history of slavery in the U.S. and its effects on the slaves, making the history personal.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, an escaped slave living in Ohio, and those close to her. The novel takes place during the 1830s to the 1870s. Sethe has committed the horrifying act of infanticide, killing her own baby girl rather than having the girl taken away by a slave catcher to be brought up in slavery. The dead baby never gets a proper name, but is known only by the one word on her gravestone – Beloved. The home situation of Sethe and her family comes to a crisis when Sethe takes in a mysterious young woman, who says and does little, and simply appears at the house, calling herself "Beloved." This woman may or may not be the ghost of the dead baby Beloved. The novel's plot explores from the position of psychology and personal experience both what led to this act of infanticide and what its results were, the damage caused to Sethe and to those who live with her.

Morrison explores the various forms of psychological damage surround Sethe's infanticide through the narrative methods of early twentieth-century modernism. Morrison's modernism is not the narrative of trivial events, as would be the case with Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27), James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914), and Samuel Beckett's *Watt* (1953). Neither is Morrison's modernism the narrative of the great events of history, as would be the case with Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1913) or E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975). The story is set in a time of political, social, and ideological upheaval, yet Morrison focuses on the effects of historical events that remain distant to the minds of the characters. As with Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1956), the major events of history are like undersea earthquakes that send tidal waves. The characters feel the devastating effects of the waves, though they are quite distant from the earthquake that caused them.

An exploration of the narrative structure of *Beloved* reveals that Morrison uses several modernist techniques. Indeed, one might see in *Beloved* a textbook case for modernism, hitting all the major characteristics of modernist novel writing that Stephen Kern identifies in his survey of modernist novels. Morrison uses unstable characters, scales large historical events as small personal ones, sets much of the action in what could be called "mental space" (Kern, 2001, 81), breaks narrative chronology, ends the novel

without firm resolution, coins new words and employs unusual syntax, and tells the story through multiple narrators.

The unstable personalities of *Beloved*'s main characters are typical of modernist novelistic practice. In modernist fiction, characters' instability may be written in several different ways. Characters can become traitors to their class and upbringing, as is often the case in D.H. Lawrence's novels. Or, characters can suffer psychological breakdowns, as occurs in Franz Kafka's stories. Character personalities can dissolve or disappear into the landscape or into the flow of words, as often happens in Virginia Woolf's novels. Characters in *Beloved* in one way or another all undergo crises of identity that occur in the ways just described. They betray their social beings, they suffer mental breakdowns, and some come close to dissolving and disappearing as characters entirely. Thus, the novel's characters might be considered as "unstable," examples of what Kern calls "volatile egos" (2011, 30). In *Beloved*, the crises are not so much questions of *who* the characters are, but *what* they are. The characters seek their identities through performance of what seems to them clear roles. Sethe wants to be "mother," represented in her fixation on breast milk. Paul D wants to be the "man of the house," shown in his efforts to do the manly work of fixing and maintaining the physical house for whatever woman he is temporarily attached to. Denver wants to be "daughter" but cannot be Sethe's daughter psychologically while Sethe is haunted by the memory of the dead baby daughter. Stamp Paid wants to be the "man who fixes people's lives" because he could not fix his own. Each character suffers from being unable to attain the ideal that he or she has defined for him or her self. Only two of the main characters apparently succeed in gaining a clear sense of themselves. These are Denver and Paul D. Denver comes to understand herself as her father's daughter rather than her mother's daughter, even if she never met her father. Paul D finds meaning for his life by becoming Sethe's caretaker at the end of the novel, thus breaking from his pattern of running away (either voluntarily or involuntarily) from women. Additionally, as Kern says, "The ultimate instability of character is insanity" (2011, 33). Sethe's insane panic at seeing schoolteacher approach her house, and her descent into self-destructive isolation toward the novel's end demonstrate her coming unattached from her self-definition as "mother," repeating in large degree the example that Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, had already set by withdrawing to life almost exclusively in one room.

Beloved is also typically modernist in having at its center a mostly absent character. The title is "Beloved," whom the reader might assume to be the protagonist or most prominent character. However, the character is dead for most of the novel, referred to in life only as the "crawling already? baby," without even a proper name. She is the missing third child, present only as a disembodied id during the early parts of the novel, and later as the mysterious young woman who just appears at Sethe's house as if out of nowhere, a character without distinct character, sucking the lives from the characters around her. The supposedly central character with little actual presence in the novel is common in modernist fiction, a feature of Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922), André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936). *Beloved* as a character draws attention to the annihilating effect of slavery on the individual psyches of the slaves. In writing with the central character as an absence rather than a presence, the

novelist also focuses on the effect the absent character makes on the other characters rather than on any extraordinary characteristics such a powerful person would have.

Another central concern of the novel is the retelling of American history as the history of ordinary people rather than legendary figures. In a way, Morrison is taking up a challenge that African American poet Langston Hughes had made. Hughes believed that the role of African Americans in history was not the only part that had been neglected in the official history and social memory of the US, but also their very presence in it had been neglected. In "I, too" Hughes implicitly accuses Walt Whitman of a cover-up when Whitman "sings" America without "singing" about African Americans. In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes tells once again the standard saga of the "American Dream" while reciting the refrain in parentheses "America never was America to me," the parentheses representing the ignored voice of the African American who has no role in this America story. Eventually in the poem, this voice breaks out of the parentheses in a bold statement that the story of America needs to be retold to include African Americans if the story is to be told truly. Morrison's *Beloved* exists in the context of this challenge to retell the American story, adding the missing, covered up, and ignored African American experience, and thus correcting the mistold history of the past to make it true by making it inclusive and accurate.

Morrison tells much of the story in mental space through interior monologue. The novel slides quite easily into interior monologue from around the second page. Beginning in typical third-person perspective starting with a description of the house, then moving to a description of the occupants, the narrative slips into Sethe's thoughts immediately after the subject of the dead baby is mentioned, beginning with "there it was again" at the end of a sentence that is otherwise external description (1987, 4). Most of the narrative gets told in this manner, shifting from external to internal and back out again. Typical is the chapter that begins "That ain't her mouth" (1987, 154). This sentence is a paragraph, a direct statement from a character's point of view, the character identified late in the next sentence as Paul D. The chapter involves just two characters, Paul D and Stamp Paid. It shifts from Paul D's internal monologue to external narrative back to Paul D's internal monologue, back out again, and finally to Stamp Paid's internal monologue. In Part Two of the novel, Morrison digs deeper into the minds of the characters, using a technique near to stream of consciousness, in which Sethe and Denver become narrators even though not speaking or writing. The novel drops into a fully stream of consciousness technique when *Beloved* becomes the narrator, the thoughts being disjointed, broken up on the page.

Morrison's use of interior monologue techniques across a spectrum, from mediated thought to free indirect discourse to full stream of conscious, is more evidence of Morrison's full investment in modernist narrative technique. Scholes and Kellogg identify the use of interior monologue "widely and without specific occasion" as characteristic of modern narrative (1966, 178). It is also characteristically modern that the interior monologue passages are employed mimetically rather than rhetorically (Scholes and Kellogg 1966, 195). That is, the writer uses the technique to get a closer approximation of the character's mental processes as they would happen if the character were a real person, as opposed to the classical interior monologue technique of plucking a

poem from a character's sensations. As Scholes and Kellogg discuss the technique in twentieth-century fiction, it becomes evidence of a crisis in narrative, a reduced belief in objective facts on which to build a story and an increased use of apprehensions of impressions as the formulae for narrative structure (1966, 203). Morrison's novel reflects this crisis. Morrison's answer to the problem is to present the characters' perceptions as the facts of the story. Characters react not as much to what happens as to what they think happens. Thus, Morrison's novel could be characterized as set in mental space as much as in physical locations of time and space.

Beloved is also typically modernist in the framing of its story. The story could be told chronologically. This is how most explicators of the novel retell the story. However, in relating the story in strict chronology, one also unavoidably lays onto it a clear idea of causation. Even if the novel were to proceed as some novels do, by presenting a mystery in present time, then shifting back to explain the mystery, the novel would unavoidably focus on causation. Morrison, however, avoids explanatory causation for the horrifying act of infanticide that dominates the characters' psyches whether they know it or not. The inability of either Sethe or Stamp Paid to explain this act to Paul D, the character closest in position to the novel's reader, shows that the cause of it is both inexpressible and probably not the most important feature of it. So, Morrison unchains the chronological connections to give the reader a fractured picture of the events. The novel begins near the end of the plot. Events in 1873 proceed mostly chronologically. However, the events of the past are presented out of sequence. Characters appear without the narrative descriptions, so that characters appear first as names only, the reader left wondering who this person is or what her or his relationship to the other characters might be. As information comes in, readers get a gradually building sense of the characters. However, the information does not come in logically or sequentially, which makes each character a puzzle for the reader to solve.

Similarly, the novel lacks a clear ending with an unambiguous message. The house at 124 will be sold. Denver has moved away to make her own life. Paul D has come to help Sethe, but it is not clear that Sethe understands this fact, nor is it clear what will happen to these characters after this. The novel ends with a passage of internal monologue from Beloved, possibly in her grave, or perhaps just hiding in a hole somewhere, imagining herself forgotten in the empty house at 124. The novel's ending presents readers with a problem rather than a solution, or perhaps several problems without clear solutions. One such problem is the nature of Beloved herself. Is she or is she not a ghost? Several people in the novel assert that she is. On the other hand, clues lie around the novel that suggest otherwise, and that she might simply be an unstable young woman who accidentally finds just the right person to come under the power of her delusions. Beloved's pregnancy at the end could be the result of the ghost's taking over Sethe's past and recreating it. However, it could also be the perfectly natural consequence of Beloved's seduction of Paul D. Her disappearance at the end could be down to exorcism, or simply fright. Nowhere does the novel assert that one of these interpretations is correct. Another unresolved component is the remainder of Sethe's life. Is she going to accept Paul D's help and rebuild her personality, or will she go the way of Baby Suggs and just quit, retiring from the world into her own private concerns? Again, the narrative

provides no clue one way or the other. The novel actually finishes with Beloved's third disjointed internal monologue, which could describe her return to her grave or could describe her disturbed observations of whatever place she has bolted to. Perhaps there is a definitive answer to what Beloved is and one to what will happen to Sethe, but Morrison is not saying what the answers are.

A further modernist technique in *Beloved* is the invention of words. For instance, Amy, the young woman who helps deliver the baby Beloved, is often referred to as the "whitegirl," and the slave catcher character "schoolteacher" never gets another name. Similar terms occur where characters do not perceive or use them as word combinations, but think of them as single words. Other novel coinages are "rememory," which Sethe uses rather than "remember," and "disremembered," which Beloved uses to describe herself in the last part of the novel. Such distortions of the common English word "memory" draw the reader's attention to the function of memory in the story. Morrison's technique of novel word coinage implies the belief that language has a personal as well as public dimension. Vocabulary choices are as distinctive as clothing choices, and reveal as much about personality and mental state.

Additionally, Morrison uses the modernist stylistic technique of multiple voices to tell the story. The reader gets part of the story from Sethe, part from Paul D, part from Stamp Paid, part from Denver, and part from Beloved, as well as parts from the third-person narrator. Along with this, Morrison uses different modes or genres of storytelling. These include internal monologue, stream of consciousness, limited third person styles, historical novel, ghost story, slave narrative, and three modernistic poems that present Beloved's unfiltered thoughts about Sethe. Regarding the "text" in *Beloved*, Carl D. Malmgren notes that not only do different types of text coexist in the one novel, but also that they exist "*in a state of tension, if not antagonism*" (1995, 96, italics in original). Malmgren identifies a strong example of this tension in the conflict of the novel as ghost story and the novel as historiography (1995, 98). That is to say, a ghost story is a fantasy, relying upon details and concepts beyond the real, and a ghost story's plot occurs largely in psychological space. The plot of a historical novel, by contrast, occupies material space. The concerns of a historical novel are with particularity of detail, the who what, where, and when of the past that forms the story's background. Both narrative modes would also ordinarily conflict with the stream-of-consciousness modernist poems that comprise Beloved's three monologues. By constantly shifting the perspective, mode, style, and narrator, Morrison conveys the complexity of the central event. There is more to it than just one woman killing her baby to keep it out of slavery.

If one puts together all these modernist techniques that Morrison uses in the book, then *Beloved* should be a key text in the modernist canon. There is, however, one aspect of modernist fiction that Morrison does not use in this novel, namely that neither the novel's prose nor its plot draws attention to the technical aspects of the writing and of fiction in general. Multiple critics over the decades have noted the self-conscious features of modernist narrative. Typical modernist novels by the major practitioners of modernist fiction either draw the reader's attention to the *written* aspects of fiction, or at least beg to be admired for the ways they break from narrative conventions. Dorothy Parsons has written that these self-conscious aspects of modernist narrative, which she calls theorizing

about fiction, are essential to modernist practice. If Parsons is right that a defining attribute of the modernist novel is the amount of theorizing about the newness of what the novelists were doing (2007, 12), then *Beloved* is a striking example of the degree to which modernist techniques had become regular practice in the second half of the twentieth century. The novel has neither theorizing about style nor any self-conscious moves drawing attention to all the changes in narrative technique that Morrison employs. The theorizing is just not there.

So, what is Morrison doing in using all these modernist techniques, but not in the way that the famous modernist writers did? The answer is that Morrison sees in these techniques a better way to bring out her major themes than straightforward narrative or historiography would do. For instance, Malmgren makes a case that Morrison unites the antagonistic narrative modes through the novel's function as slave narrative (1995). The point that becomes clear is that such an attempt at unification is evidence that in this novel, modernist practice has become nothing new. Intertextuality is another tool to get to a truth that is not about language, or writing, or art, but instead on the way that history affects people.

A major theme of *Beloved* and of most of Morrison's fiction is how the psychological traumas of terrible events change people. In *Beloved* the major reaction people have to trauma is withdrawal. These withdrawals take many forms. Paul D engages with the world at a superficial level, but keeps his emotions tightly locked in the tin tobacco box in his heart. Sethe and Baby Suggs try to separate themselves from the world, Baby Suggs by going to bed and contemplating colors, Sethe by succumbing to the enervating effects of Beloved's obsessions, which finally lead Sethe to take to Baby Suggs' bed as well. Denver and Stamp Paid, however, escape their introverted lethargies to create some kind of role for themselves within the public domain. The difference reminds the reader that not all responses to traumatizing social-political events are the same. Everyone is damaged, though the degree of damage is different for each.

Another important theme of the book and of much of Morrison's fiction is the relationship between mothers and children, especially mothers and daughters. The issue comes up in the idea that children, especially girls, need to be protected and defended. In *Beloved*, the issue becomes how an African American mother protects her children from the depredations of "whitefolks," especially White men. Sethe's mother, a slave transported from Africa, has little chance to take care of Sethe and apparently does not give much thought to this. She remains a distant and hazy figure in Sethe's mind. Yet, Sethe will replicate in a way her mother's particular kind of care. Sethe's mother was raped by White men and had babies because of it. She killed all of these babies. The one baby she had by a Black man she kept, that being Sethe. Killing one's own baby for what appears to be a good cause, then, is part of Sethe's psyche. Sethe's own type of mothering apart from this is much different. Yet, as Paul D says, her love is "too thick." She puts all of her love and attention toward one child, the one she kills first so she can save the baby from what she believes to be something much worse than death. From when Sethe first arrives at 124, the "crawling already? baby" receives more of her attention than the other children. It is the focus of her attention while its ghost haunts the house, and the focus of her attention when she believes that Beloved is the baby come back. This thick love leads

Sethe to neglect her twin boys Howard and Buglar, who both run away from home at age thirteen, and her daughter Denver, who can never get her mother's full attention. In essence, Sethe sees herself to be a failure as a mother, unable to protect her most precious child, unable to fulfill all the duties she thinks she has to, represented in her notion that schoolteacher's nephews "stole" her milk when they raped her while she was a slave in Kentucky.

The novel in its historical aspects relates the problems of creating self and identity given the lasting psychological and institutional effects of slavery. An essential problem in this aspect of creating an integrated identity is related to the communal self. Humans are communal animals. Every part of slavery prevents a genuine community among the slaves from forming. For instance, even on a liberal slave-based farm like Sweet Home, the slaves cannot have a formal marriage ceremony. Baby Suggs's eight children are by six different fathers. The brother Paul F is forced to leave home when he is sold, and not from a personal desire to set out on his own. To go courting, Sixo must leave the farm in secret and walk for miles to meet Thirty-Mile Woman. Sixo in this mirrors the slave character Tomey's Turl from William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942), who occasionally escapes from the farm to which he is enslaved to spend time with Tennie, a female slave on a neighboring farm. Slaves are not allowed to have education. They are kept deliberately illiterate. By these means, slavery prevents the slaves from developing laws or creating a lasting historical record apart from oral tradition and rumor.

The problems inherent in lacking a communal identity extend beyond the period of slavery, so that even after the war, many of the same difficulties persist, though just in new form. Family relations, for instance, often do not fare much better than they had in slave times. Without literacy or a clear historical record, former slaves cannot find lost family members or missing friends. Former slaves are wary of forming deep personal attachments, and this wariness extends to the next generation. This is especially true at 124, where there is no untroubled family relationship. The two boys, Howard and Buglar, leave home both at the age thirteen, and never send word of what happened to them. Denver through most of the novel stays emotionally distant from her mother. Similarly, the usual community rituals are disrupted. Examples include Sethe's inability to pay for a headstone and Baby Suggs's time as a lay preacher in a woodland clearing. Similar to slave times, African Americans after the war continued to have little access to education. They also had little recourse to the law, as shown in the way that Sethe's release from jail comes about mostly because of the beneficence of a White man. African Americans were paid for work at nearly subsistence levels, so that they lived in low-quality houses and constantly struggled for food. Sethe, for example, relies quite heavily on leftovers from her restaurant job as the way to feed her family. All of these things leave the African American community of Cincinnati in the novel dysfunctional in many ways.

Additionally, the novel's fractured narrative shows how slavery and its after-effects impair development of an individual identity. Central to this theme is the issue of names. For example, the Garners at Sweet Home call Baby Suggs "Jenny" because that is what her price tag said. They continue to call her Jenny even when Baby says that the name she chose for herself is Baby because that is what her current "husband" calls her. Stamp Paid's slave name was Joshua. However, he names himself Stamp Paid as an

identity marker, signifying that his life's work is paying off the debt he believes he owes for thinking evil thoughts. A supreme act of renaming occurs when schoolteacher and his nephews burn Sixo in a pyre. Sixo shouts "Seven-O," a defiant rejection in death of his slave identity.

Although nearly every character in the book is a victim of slavery in some form, Morrison never strives to make the reader pity the characters. Furthermore, she makes the would-be villain of the story, the cruel schoolteacher, have only a very small role. Morrison skillfully avoids laying blame or dwelling on the injustices heaped upon slaves and their immediately following generation. The injustices speak for themselves. Instead, Morrison's focus is on these people's endurance. Paul D asks Stamp Paid, "How much is a nigger supposed to take?" Stamp Paid replies, "All he can" (1987). This theme in Morrison's novel is another connection to Faulkner, who considered "endurance" the sign of the African Americans' moral superiority to racist and slave-owning White society. In *Beloved*, endurance is the way toward self-definition and self-recognition. Paul D, Stamp Paid, and Denver do not merely survive, they endure, meaning that they still retain their pride and identity, or even gain their pride and identity, through outlasting the terrible things that happen to them.

Perhaps what concerns Morrison the most in this novel is the possibility to rebuild a life after it has been strained seemingly past endurance. What remains after failure and despair? And how can one best tell the tale of what led up to the moment that rebuilding begins? Telling this story requires a certain distance from the characters on the narrator's part, so that the reader has space to sympathize without being forced into it. Such a tale requires an unconventional, seemingly broken method of telling, allowing the terrible moments to reveal themselves as they are churned up. In the end, the reader is left to marvel at characters who pick up the pieces and start again.

Critics such as Kern often consider modernism almost exclusively as a reaction to nineteenth-century realism. However, if it were only a reaction, modernism as artistic practice would not have lasted as long as it has. An assessment of modernism as reaction to realism misses a common assertion of the writers from the early twentieth century that what they were writing was the new realism. For these writers, fragmented personalities, ambiguous language, suspect historical narratives, and social alienation were reality. A writer to be any good and to write anything that lasted, needed to find the techniques that would best represent that reality. Modernist writers of the first half of the twentieth century used style as provocation. *Beloved* demonstrates that in the world of artistic literature in the second half of the twentieth century, the struggle to assert that there is a new concept of reality and that fiction must be different to conform to that concept becomes moot. The writer assumes that reality *is* fragmented and uncertain; plus, the writer assumes that the reader will fundamentally agree with this conception of reality.

Primarily, what comes across in a novel such as *Beloved*, one written from the assumption of the verity of the modernist depiction of social reality, is a strong distrust of what the writer and readers think of as "master narratives" of history. The story of slavery in America as it usually gets passed on would not suit Morrison's purpose or temperament, nor would it suit those of her assumed readers. Such a narrative would not be "real" unless it got "personal." The story of slavery in America from such a

perspective would not be an account of the major events in history, but rather an account of the victims of history, told from their points of view. Modernist fiction culminates in this movement away from the politics of nineteenth-century realism as a spur to action, and toward a politics of personal realism that voices history as a collection of overlapping accounts by and about those who lived through what society and history did to them. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* fulfills the logic of modernism and reveals the acceptance of that logic's conclusions.

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