



Beloved: The Physical Embodiment of Psychological Trauma

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Abstract

This paper delves into the role of Beloved in Toni Morrison's novel Beloved as the embodiment of the traumatized selves of Sethe and Denver. It argues that the multifaceted trauma in this novel, displayed by a loss of time and language, generational violence, and oral fixation, is directly reflected by Beloved. The traumatization of this family is generational, irrevocably tying the three primary female characters together. On a more detailed level, the graphic murder of Beloved is the common traumatic tie between Sethe and her daughters. Therefore, this scene will connect the various threads of this analysis. Many have analyzed the individual trauma of the novel's characters, but few have detailed the role of Beloved as a physical manifestation of this trauma. This paper analyzes this topic and further develops it by arguing that Beloved's role as the embodiment of trauma enables Sethe and Denver to overcome their pasts.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison tackles life's darkest elements through the story of an escaped slave, based around the murder of her innocent infant. The twisted mother-daughter relationships of *Beloved* showcase the fracturing effect of slavery upon the human mind. Morrison radically presents this phenomenon by granting the psychological effects of slavery a physical embodiment, resurrecting a figure to adopt the secondary selves of the living. Beloved enters at an illusory high point in the protagonists' lives as a physical manifestation of the split identities of Sethe and Denver.

Essentially, *Beloved* tells the story of a single, largely female family. As a slave, Sethe meets her husband and falls in love; however, this does not protect her from sexual assault or psychological trauma. Sethe, the mother of the novel's primary family, escapes slavery only to be hunted down by her former owner. Though she escapes slavery with three children, she gives birth to her fourth on the way to freedom. When her former owner, known as the school teacher, finds Sethe's new home, she is led to slit her daughter's throat to protect her. Following this event, the novel primarily focuses on the current state of Sethe's

family. Beloved, at first present as a poltergeist in the home, soon appears as an adult woman, driving a wedge between Sethe and an old lover and building a relationship with her sister, Denver.

Aside from a diverse collection of historical slave narratives, Morrison's *Beloved* presents this revolutionary novel as a unique addition to the genre – fictionalizing and stretching the typical slave narrative structure. Unlike many narratives of this type, “Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of a very few examples of literature that is written in a maternal voice” (Cullinan 78). Of the few female slave narratives, even fewer strive to represent the unique struggles of motherhood within slavery. Furthermore, texts often exclude the maternal perspective even from discussions of motherhood (Cullinan 77). As a combination of two historical accounts, two peculiar cases of escaped female slaves, this novel speaks to the unspeakable, and somewhat incommunicable, rawness of trauma. *Beloved* speaks to the pervasiveness of psychological trauma through its content and form; “the principal narrative strategy of the novel is to drop an unexplained fact on the reader, veer away into other matters, then circle back with more information” (35). In this cyclical pattern, one which the female characters also readily adopt, the novel plays with the notion of excluding the truth. Even the story's most graphic scene, the murder of Sethe's infant daughter, is only provided by the detached voice of the narrator. The fact that the complete traumatic narrative is never provided by the book's characters speaks volumes to Morrison's delicate approach to writing trauma. A subtle, yet unignorably unique, theme of this text is this pattern of protecting the characters from their traumatic pasts. As the novel progresses, the reader learns the family's twisted story. Sethe emerges from slavery alongside her four children, abused and demoralized. From this detrimental starting point, the novel's three primary female characters fall victim to a series of violent deaths and emotional tragedies, all of which result in their collective psychological fragmentation.

Both Sethe and Denver experience a psychological split, simultaneously embodying their able and traumatized selves. While Sethe inhabits a state of total dissociation, Denver is trapped in a terrifying childhood. Morrison presents their psychological conditions through a range of metaphors and subtle textual manipulation. As these psychological effects progress, Beloved appears as the living reflection of these two women.

Beloved is particularly burdened with trauma, displaying psychological crises in the form of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver. The traumatization of the family is generational, a familiar pattern that appears frequently throughout slave narratives. Sethe's own story, growing up under a mother who essentially disposes of all of her other newborns without concern, suggests that “Sethe's own infanticide is prefigured by that of her own mother” (Caeser 114). Sethe recognizes her mother's actions with feelings of displacement; “Sethe clearly loved her mother, but remembers little about her, and her memories are tainted by a great legacy of fear and resentment” (Cullinan 90). Nevertheless, Sethe cannot

help but fall victim to the same pattern.

Other stories within this genre detail the experiences of slaves, often mimicking an autobiographical style. Many of them share similar elements including the line, “I was born...” and tales of abuse. The cycle of violence central in the characters’ psychological decline is passed from mother to daughter (Putnam 30). Early in the novel, again returning to her own history, Sethe recounts the wrongful murder of her mother. In much the same way as the other traumatic incidents dealt with in the text, the violence of Sethe’s past effectively taints her relationships with her daughters. As the novel progresses, “horrors from the past [continue to] intrude on the text, dominating both it and the lives of *Beloved*’s characters” (Hinson 148); this cycle acts as the foundation for the trauma-based relationships between mothers and daughters. Unlike other stories within the slave-narrative genre, Morrison centers her story on the unique relational conflict of mothers and daughters (Cullinan), documenting “the tragic human cost of being ‘other,’ and [taking readers] into the dim regions of desubjectivization and undifferentiation” (Moglen 22). Reduced to less than human by the confines of slavery, these women have no identities outside of mother and daughters or slaves (Liscio 31). Along with these singular titles comes a complex and co-dependent kind of relationship.

The background violence of this story makes the family’s relationships all the more challenging, as expressed by the graphic murder of Beloved and the terror Denver associates with her interactions with Sethe. Literary critic Cullinan also speaks to this, writing, “the relationship between mothers and daughters is complex, highly charged with conflicting emotions, fundamental to the transmission of culture from generation to generation” (85). Here, we see the necessity of generational connections, juxtaposed with a pattern of cyclical violence. A pattern of generational violence is frequently repeated not only in slave narratives in general but also in the female characters of Morrison’s novels in particular (Putnam), further reflecting her propensity for writing mother-daughter relationships in the context of slavery. In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the unique dynamics of mother-daughter relationships to portray cyclical violence as a part of broader psychological traumatization.

The process of coping with trauma and recovering from violence follow similar patterns; they both involve repression and the return of the source (Hinson 150). Sethe is especially representative of this crossover in that she experiences multiple types of trauma. *Beloved* details the collision of all of these factors in Sethe as her repressed trauma re-surfaces through Beloved’s reincarnation. As a defense mechanism, Sethe chooses stagnancy over healthy relationships, embodying the characterization of repression as, “to divert [trauma] into the dark silences” (Moglen 24). Sethe’s experiences with violence are seeded in slavery—slavery being the dominating subplot of this novel. Slavery strips Sethe’s life of any loving relationships and ultimately shapes her traumatic mothering experience. Growing up as a slave, Sethe’s mother is a stranger to her, sent to

work while Sethe stays behind. When Sethe, a child, tries to identify with her mother by asking for a brand of her own, her mother slaps her (Morrison 77). In this moment, the horrors of slavery permanently taint Sethe's relationships with a sense of mistrust. Slavery deprives Sethe of a healthy mother-daughter relationship and violates her humanity, leading her to believe killing her own daughter is a legitimate escape (Schapiro 195; Caesar 113). Sethe experiences the most explicit split as a result, traumatized by slavery and murdering her own daughter.

Motherhood only pushes Sethe into further psychological instability. While her children give Sethe the motivation to escape slavery, they are also the crux which leads to her decline into dissociation. Sethe explicitly acknowledges the divisive effects of her children, thinking, "[Beloved] asleep on my back. Denver sleep in my stomach. Felt like I was split in two" (Morrison 238). Here, Morrison displays the unique nature of Sethe's split. Not only is Sethe psychologically divided, the physical experiences of pregnancy and childbirth also cause a more literal divide for Sethe between her daughters and herself. The rare combination of emotion and physicality found in motherhood stands out among other human relationships; "in maternal experience, pain and joy, suffering and healing, death and new life are so tightly bound together that one cannot exist without the other" (Cullinan 78). In more ways than not, Sethe is irrevocably tied to her daughters in a way she cannot relate to anyone else—in a way she has not had the opportunity to relate to anyone else. During her escape, Sethe worries about her children more than herself, thinking about her own survival only in the context of her unborn baby's life. Morrison expresses this through Sethe's inner dialogue, writing, "the thought of herself stretched out dead while the [baby] lived on...grieved her so" (Morrison 37-38). This highlights the effects of motherhood upon Sethe's sense of self, forcing her to view herself as worthless.

Sethe's depreciated worth in the context of motherhood is also a result of the twisted parallel between slavery and motherhood. In both contexts, "mothers [are] objects of reflection, not subjects" (Cullinan 81). In slavery, Sethe is forced to obey her master's orders and meet their expectations. Similarly, in motherhood, a woman quickly becomes a supporter for and mere reflection of their children. Existing research on the novel delves extensively into this issue, contemplating the feelings of a mother who was once a slave. In a way, Sethe escapes the oppressive control of her master, only to find herself endlessly indebted to the four people she herself made. Literary critic Caesar focuses on this damaging relationship, writing, "if motherhood and slavery are equitable, then a mother can feel she is, exactly, a slave to her daughter" (113). In her pursuit of freedom, Sethe sees herself more as a source of milk for her living and unborn babies than as a human being. Morrison does not allow this factor to go unrecognized in her work, expressing Sethe's equation of motherhood to slavery in lines such as, "needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, *that caring*—again. Having to stay alive just that much longer...Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer" (Morrison

132). Existing research argues that the overlap between slavery and motherhood is part of what pushes Sethe into insanity, continuing her trauma on after slavery (Caesar). Furthermore, this effect is intensified by Sethe's undeniably intense dedication to her children. Sethe approaches her maternal responsibilities with a passion almost too fierce.

While Sethe's low self-esteem is not projected onto her daughters, her low self-worth, in combination with a lack of a bond with her own mother, perverts Sethe's understanding of maternal affection. A pattern of female aggression as a version of love accompanies the cycle of violence which underlies Sethe's traumatization. Literary critic Putnam analyzes this association, suggesting, starting with her mother's slap and extending through Beloved's murder, "Sethe learns...that maternal violence...can be an expression of possession and even love" (40). The paradoxical combination of violence and love is exemplified by the contrast between Sethe's expression of passionate devotion in lines such as, "no more powerful than the way I loved her" (Morrison 5) and horrific acts like killing her young daughter. To return to Sethe's only distinct interaction with her own mother, her mother slaps her to protect her. The violence in this scene both seeks to clarify that ownership is not desirable and provides the reader with the only moment of emotional intimacy between Sethe and her mother. In showing her daughter the brand beneath her breast, Sethe's mother shows she cares about her daughter enough to ensure Sethe has a way to identify her. This, especially in the wake of her mother's unrighteous hanging, is particularly poignant. Later, Sethe adopts a similar combination of violence and love, speaking to the fact that, "while painful..., this redirection can also be seen as an additional mothering lesson—an instinctive message teaching black children coping mechanisms" (Putnam 26). Emotionally stunted by trauma and the social isolation of slavery, Sethe interacts with those she loves in the only way she knows how—through impassioned violence.

Despite her frequent use of violence, Sethe's maternal instinct is the only force that keeps her, bloody and emotionally distraught, moving forward. Nevertheless, the dichotomy of her fear of slavery and her love for her children burdens Sethe throughout the entire novel. Emerging from the horrors of slavery, Sethe inhabits a kind of trauma-based hysteria "that allows the self to survive, but not to prosper, mirrors the cultural psychosis which is its cause" (Moglen 34) and its oppressive familial boundaries. Eventually, the conflict between love and fear drives Sethe to her breaking point. Critic Kristin Boudreau writes, "what the process of torture does is split the human being into two" (452), providing insight into Sethe's actions by unequivocally defining slavery as torture. This classification brings Sethe's experiences to an entirely new level, suggesting the possibility of psychological effects as severe as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. This provides a clinical rationale for Sethe's "irrational" actions. Furthermore, placing Sethe's story under the title of "torture" legitimizes the detailed analysis of her trauma. Sethe's slave experience, including

whipping, rape, and a terror-filled escape, predictably results in traumatization. The resulting combination of love and fear leads her to murder her own daughter. The graphic nature of the murder scene both reveals the horrors of slavery and Sethe's twisted perception of love. Morrison spares no detail in describing this scene, writing, "little nigger-boy eyes open in the sawdust; little nigger-girl eyes staring between wet fingers that held her face so her head wouldn't fall off" (177). This incident catapults a shattered Sethe into the present day, thoroughly traumatizing Denver and setting the stage for Beloved's ambiguous appearance.

While Beloved's death is the final tipping point for Sethe's sanity, it is one of the first and most destructive memories for Denver. The graphic murder of Beloved is the common traumatic tie between Sethe and Denver. Morrison's choice to describe the murder with such intense detail and render Sethe incapable of talking about it, emphasizes the magnitude of this event. These choices also open the door to tell the story of these characters' recovery, a process that requires them to "re-experience the originary violence in order to escape" it (Hinson 150). The process of reliving their trauma begins with the very start of the novel. Beloved reenters the story early on as a ghost haunting 124, shaping the interactions of Sethe and Denver before she enters the physical realm. In fact, the book opens with the line, "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom" (Morrison 3), placing Beloved and her female compatriots squarely at the center of the novel. Beloved's untimely death cleaves her from what grounds one as human; she dies nameless and therefore, without a tie to her identity. Without a name, "[Beloved] has been denied the narrative of being" (Schapiro 209). However, even as a ghost, Beloved holds a massive stake in the lives of her family members. As time passes, Denver and Sethe fall into a dissociative "normal." While both characters are traumatized and living in fear of their own fragile mother-daughter relationship, "Sethe and Denver...learn to live with and love the ghost" (Osagie 426). Sethe consistently expresses her love, albeit with a dissonant undertone, through acts like braiding Denver's hair and her eventual romantic relationship with Paul D. Following Paul D's arrival, Beloved's ghost is scared away, leaving her without an identity once again. The term "Beloved" in and of itself signifies the impermanence of her identity; she only receives this name after death, paid for with Sethe's body. This detail is especially significant because the woman who took her life grants her the only tie to humanity. Even more ironically, the woman who gave her life also ends it. This hefty juxtaposition is the heaviest burden on the shoulders of the book's female characters, particularly Denver.

Denver's split results from the fallout of this murder in her infancy. Morrison foreshadows Denver's traumatization in the disturbing line, "Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (179). In this line, Morrison also solidifies the connection between Denver and Beloved. Both women are trapped in the same complex position—that of Sethe's daughter. More broadly, these characters ask the question "What *is* a daughter?...*Beloved* poses the question in a world where the family is destroyed and traditional family identities are in

ruins” (Caesar 114). Before Beloved’s arrival, Denver is her mother’s only source of love and support, a heavy burden to bear. As a result of social isolation and her mother’s refusal to acknowledge the murder, Denver constructs an exaggerated version of Sethe, pushing herself into a worse psychological condition. Though Denver does not remember the murder, “if an infant is traumatically frustrated in its first love relationship...this intense neediness of the infant’s own love becomes dangerous and threatening” (Schapiro 197). As a result, neither Sethe nor Denver learns how to appropriately express their love for one another. Instead, Denver’s affection surfaces as an unquenchable need for Sethe’s recognition.

When examined in the context of Erikson’s developmental crises, this observation displays the unresolved nature of Denver’s past—specifically the trust versus mistrust crisis of infancy (Lightfoot et al. 17). She expresses her traumatization retrospectively, thinking, “I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it” (Morrison 242). Denver’s resulting traumatization may also be a result of her relationship with her mother during childhood and in the present. Denver and Sethe exist in an isolated world with just each other and when one considers that “mothers and daughters [are equally] figures of mutual substitution...[that] every mother is, or was, also a daughter” (Caesar 112) it is easy to imagine how easily the boundary between an isolated mother and daughter, or the line dividing their traumas, may dissolve. Out of this instability, Denver cultivates a hostile image of her mother. Unable to trust the woman who is her sole source of love and provision, Denver lives in a constant state of dread.

Now thoroughly separated from reality, Denver and Sethe move forward in a fragmented state that is most clearly identified by an overarching loss of time and language. Sethe’s persistent stuttering and Denver’s inability to communicate with her mother indicates both characters are trapped in a dissociative connection between word and mouth. Literary critic Koolish classifies Sethe and Denver as “dreamwalkers in a state of dissociation and denial” (169), highlighting an underlying psychological storm. In this description, the stagnancy of the characters’ lives adopts a new label: dissociation. This quality is first seen in their loss of language.

After hearing about her mother’s crimes, Denver goes deaf. This is the first obstacle in communication between characters. Her deafness is indicative of a state of denial, a protective response to traumatic information. Denver’s choice, whether conscious or unconscious, to block out her mother, and language altogether, reflects a larger linguistic pattern. The novel as a whole plays with this idea on a macro level as a “fantasy that seeks to name the unnamable” (Moglen 20). Within the text, the characters represent this as both Sethe and Denver choose to shut down instead of retelling the murder. Denver is traumatized early on in her life and then forced to relive the event she unconsciously experienced. The traumatic nature of this murder is further intensified by the fact that Denver learns about it from community members. As a child, Denver enters the community

and the locals tell her about her mother's crimes. Denver learns about Sethe's arrest from others and not Sethe herself, which speaks to the core language issue of the novel—the women's inability to speak about their own horrific histories. Critic Hamilton claims, "it is the inability of the characters...to speak directly of the scene of murder which produces the most significant gaps within the told stories of the novel" (430–431). Denver's deafness supports this notion; instead of processing reality through language, she creates a gap by blocking out language altogether.

Similarly, while Denver chooses not to hear her mother's words, Sethe cannot translate her trauma into words; "Sethe's own attempt to communicate her pain...mirrors the larger narrative, made 'recognizable but undecipherable' (199)" (Boudreau 455). At no point in the novel does Sethe successfully pass on her own story. She does not possess the stability or distance from her trauma to discuss it. The people surrounding Sethe's family know the reality of what happened the night Beloved was murdered; in her recognition of the new woman as her dead daughter, even Sethe acknowledges the murder on some level. However, despite Sethe's subconscious recognition that she committed murder, she cannot manage to tell the whole story. The novel explains Sethe's behavior by repeating the phrase, "remembering seemed unwise" (Morrison). This notion is used to address Sethe's past and her rejection at the hands of her community. Part of the reason Sethe is not able to put her story into words is because she thinks it is easier, even better, to forget her past than to remember it.

Above and beyond Sethe, all of the women of this novel experience such pain and psychological damage as a result of Beloved's murder that they cannot put it into one kind of language (Boudreau 456–457). Morrison expresses this in the choice to change perspectives multiple times throughout the book. Literary critic Hinson suggests "*Beloved's* narrative crisis manifests itself not only in temporal or chronological collapse, but also in the collapse of difference among narrative voice" (158). The prose chapters dedicated to each of the three primary female characters, near the conclusion of the piece, demonstrate this notion. These chapters function as the internal dialogue of three separate and uniquely traumatized women. However, at this point in the novel, the characters have overlapped, Beloved adopting the characteristics of her mother and sister, and their traumatic pasts are hopelessly entwined with one another. Morrison expresses this through slippage in language; the psychological similarities underlying the linguistic variation expresses the dissociation of Sethe and Denver, placing language between their traumatization and reality.

In association with their loss of language, the women's loss of time also goes to validate their state of dissociation. The book's lapses into stories from Sethe's past exhibit the fluidity of her memory, having lost her understanding of time as linear. The loss of time in *Beloved* is both character specific and generalized; "[its] linear forward movement is interrupted by repetitions and the return of the repressed" (Hinson 152). To move beyond their traumatization, the

female characters must return to their original trauma. In places, the novel even appears to move forward and backward simultaneously (Hinson 151), mirroring the process of dealing with past trauma by reenacting it. This further signifies a loss of time, demonstrating that while the trauma occurred many years ago, a piece of Sethe is still trapped in the past. “Sethe’s consciousness, and the consciousness of Denver...and the twenty-year-old Beloved...are suffused with a...diffused chronology common to persons so severely abused that they suffer from... dissociative states” (Koolish 170). The severity of these women’s traumatization connects to their loss of time, categorizing the novel’s lack of chronology as a symptom of their psychological splits. The characters’ ongoing inability to distinguish past from present indicates the presence of significant damage.

Sethe’s loss of time causes many relational issues with Denver and Beloved. Sethe acknowledges her loss of time in lines such as, “I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory” (Morrison 43). The repeated use of the pre-fix “re” here and throughout the novel signifies a deeper problem. The novel as a whole, and the traumatic repetition implied by the term “rememory,” portrays Sethe’s experience of time as cyclical. Sethe is at once trapped deep in her traumatic past and in the present. This time-enabled split causes her to break; “the unmaking of language and memory...points to a more alarming unmaking of selfhood” (Boudreau 47). While Beloved is deprived of a sense of self from her very beginning, her murder also causes Sethe’s identity to split apart. No longer capable of maintaining a linear time line, Sethe collapses in on herself, pulling Denver down with her. Her repeated cycling between present and past reopens the wounds of her traumatization, allowing Beloved to create an identity from the remaining fragments of her mother and sister. Critic Hamilton again ties the characters’ psychological splits to their gradual loss of time, writing, “Morrison uses psychological time rather than real time, and memory rather than lived experience, to emphasize the importance of perception” (437). In much the same way that Morrison recreates the representation of psychological traumatization through the physical appearance of Beloved, she also reforms this concept by taking away her characters’ ability to control time, enabling Beloved’s role as the reflection of her family’s trauma.

As the characters’ psychological conditions develop over the course of the novel, Beloved eagerly adopts them. She manifests as the living reflection of the two women’s fractured identities. Furthermore, Beloved’s adoption of her relatives’ traumatized selves redefines Sethe and Denver’s relationship with one another. Independently, Beloved remains ambiguous throughout much of the story. Morrison enhances this quality through her choice of narrative perspective; “having to make do with only a description of bits and pieces of [Beloved’s] ‘body,’ the reader is struck by the deliberate withholding of important details” (Osagie 426). While, in some ways, this intentional narrative limitation confines Beloved to vagueness, it also makes it all the easier for her to mirror the split selves

of Sethe and Denver. During Beloved's presence, and through her role as the physical embodiment of their psychological trauma, Sethe and Denver drastically change. Beloved forces them to both re-experience their past trauma and see the consequences as they present in themselves and are reflected in Beloved. Once this cycle of repetition is complete, Beloved vanishes (Hinson 161). This supports the notion that Beloved personifies the trauma Sethe and Denver have experienced in order to preserve their core identities.

The identification of Beloved as an amalgamation of Sethe and Denver's split selves also requires one to delve into the nature of individual identities in *Beloved*. Perpetually trapped in an infantile mother-daughter relationship, the two daughters allow their identities to bleed into one another. Literature critic Schapiro suggests "the major characters in the novel are all working out of a deep loss of self, a profound narcissistic wound that results from a breakdown of the earliest relations between self and other" (197). Denver and Beloved both lack a sense of self. Following Beloved's murder, Denver and Beloved are incapable of drawing the dividing line between their respective selves and Sethe. The larger setting worsens this condition when the community rejects Sethe's family. Morrison describes the community's level of animosity in lines such as, "[the village] forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales...those that saw her that day...deliberately forgot her" (Morrison 323). Without recognition from their larger community, Sethe and her children are unable to identify themselves as active subjects (Schapiro 197). Beloved and Denver face this confusion of self in distinct ways. Denver is more socially connected with her mother because Sethe is her entire world. In this way, Denver's lack of self stems from her isolation and the complicated relationship she has with Sethe as her only remaining child. Meanwhile, "[Beloved's] identity is still confused with her mother's" (Osagie 429). Never granted a tie to the physical world, Beloved never develops beyond the earliest stages of childhood. At this point in her development, Piaget's developmental theory suggests Beloved does not yet have the capacity to form a concrete sense of self (Lightfoot et al. 19–20) since she is still, in many ways, part of her mother. Even linguistically, Sethe denies any separation between herself and her children, refusing to "use signifiers to represent" them (Wyatt 474). This gap in Sethe's language is indicative of further developmental disruption.

In addition to lacking a concrete sense of self, these women also face a severe preoccupation with the oral stage of Freud's psychosexual development. In the context of this novel, Freud's psychosexual stages of development, now largely viewed as odd or even archaic, are used as a narrative trope rather than a diagnostic tool. This analysis does not strive to argue why the women of Morrison's novel fit the fine details of Freud's developmental stages. Instead, this section of the paper serves to recognize Morrison's use of characteristically infantile tendencies, outlined by Freud, to portray her characters as psychologically and relationally stunted.

This effect is most prominent in *Denver* and *Beloved*, both trapped in disturbed infancies; however, their conditions are worsened by the oral obsession of their mother, Sethe, as well. Freud divides infancy and early childhood into five psychosexual stages: oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital (Lightfoot et al. 17). These developmental stages coincide with the establishment of the human psyche. During the oral stage, also the first psychosexual stage, the child gains sexual and emotional satisfaction from communication through the mouth, fully embodied by the impulsive id (Lightfoot et al. 17). In the case of Morrison's characters, fascination with the oral stage connects to the stunted development of the self, traumatization, and a twisted form of trust. These characteristics are shared by characters of multiple works by Morrison and tied to relational struggles by Putnam, who states that the characters do "not learn to navigate relationships or learn to trust—and so the innocent and self-martyring act of rescue from the mother becomes also an act of violence" (33). While here Putnam is detailing a relational pattern seen in Morrison's *Mercy*, this same tie between stunted psychological development and broken mother-daughter relationships also appears in *Beloved*. Infants can only communicate through their mouths, making feeding one of their sole forms of relational interaction. All three of *Beloved's* female characters exhibit a pattern of oral fixation as a result of their traumatization.

Sethe relates to the oral stage primarily through the emotional weight she places on breast milk. This, at its foundations, ties back to her life as a slave. Before escaping, Sethe is brutalized by a group of men. She identifies the loss of her breast milk as the most horrific part of this attack, despite the fact that she is also raped (Schapiro 198). This reemphasizes her early prioritization of her children's lives above her own and the toll motherhood takes on her psychological well-being. Literary critic Wyatt contextualizes the immense value Sethe places on breast milk in writing, "spiritual and emotional commitment becomes in Sethe a physical connection to the nursing baby she has sent on ahead: 'I had to get my milk to my baby girl' (Morrison 16)" (475). Incapable of processing her trauma verbally, and dissociated from reality, Sethe must literally ground her emotions and attachments. In much the same way that she uses *Beloved's* need for her breast milk to temporarily rise above the trauma of slavery, Sethe also uses *Beloved's* physical form to overcome her overall traumatization. This provides further support for the theory that *Beloved* is an amalgamation of the traumatized selves of Sethe and *Denver*, brought into the physical realm to be defeated. Wyatt identifies this again in a scene soon after this line, where Paul D holds Sethe's breasts in his hands (Morrison 21) and the text alternates between metaphors and literality. Even in language, Sethe seems dependent upon the overlaps between her psychological trauma and her physical, tangible, reality. For Sethe, oral obsession is part of her saving grace, grounding her psychological symptoms.

As Sethe primarily relates to her children through breastfeeding, *Denver* and *Beloved* also relate to their mother on a largely oral basis. *Denver's* oral connection to her mother in infancy and the relationship fostered through

breastfeeding, makes the image of Denver simultaneously drinking her mother's milk and her sister's blood especially significant. This scene establishes a concrete connection between Denver and Beloved. It is a significant obstacle in Denver's completion of the oral stage, forever condemning her to an infantile expression of love. Denver embodies the passive nature of the oral stage, intent on absorbing attention from Beloved and her mother, even to her own detriment. "For Denver, 'looking' at Beloved 'was food enough to last. But to be looked at in turn was beyond appetite' ([Morrison] 118)" (Schapiro 198). For Denver, consumption is a substitute for more advanced social interaction. Trapped in the egotistical perspective of childhood by trauma, she relies heavily on her mother.

When Sethe begins to heal through her rekindled relationship with Paul D, she fails to fulfill Denver's attentional needs. In her place, Beloved grants Denver importance. Despite his positive influence upon Sethe's psychological health, "Denver does not see Paul D as the other women do; for her he does not play the same nurturing role. She sees him only as a threat" (Schapiro 205). In likeness, Beloved first reacts violently to Paul D's intrusion, acting out as a household poltergeist and later taking up a sexual relationship with Paul D in Sethe's place. In this way, Beloved sides with Denver. Without a sufficient level of attention, Denver instead relies upon consumption. At first, she largely grows through indirect interactions with her mother, "[constructing] her sense of self from the stories that are told about the extraordinary circumstances of her birth (Hamilton 430). However, when Beloved introduces a new kind of nonverbal communication, she acts as the companion of which Denver has long been deprived. Here, the tie between language and oral fixation resurfaces in a relational context.

When Denver loses the capacity to use language, going temporarily deaf, the sound of Beloved's ghost on the steps returns her hearing. In this, Beloved grants Denver importance, giving her the responsive attention she desires. Beloved later sympathizes with Denver's social hunger, characterized by overtly oral statements such as "licked, tasted, eaten, by Beloved's eyes" (Morrison 68), tying social acknowledgement to oral fixation. Beloved, away from her family for years, has experienced social isolation even more severe than Denver's. This experience produces a need for attention similar to Denver's, but more guttural. "The oral imagery in the novel is closely associated with ocular imagery," particularly in relation to Beloved (Schapiro 200). Beloved must express her oral fixation in an unusual way, trapped between the oral preoccupation of infancy and the physical and social boundaries of adult relationships. However, the translation of oral desires into visual consumption also functions as a minor example of a larger benefit for Beloved, that she is "able to articulate infantile feelings that ordinarily remain unspoken" (Wyatt 474). A large part of Beloved's character is that Denver's egoistic perspective is immediately reflected in Beloved and intensified by her voracious hunger for recognition, creating a connection between oral fixation and attention.

In fact, all three of these women come from a place of relational hunger, constantly vying for attention. As the novel progresses, Beloved grows out of mismatched relationships and becomes a reflection of the traumatized selves of Sethe and Denver, transforming their respective characters in the process. On a foundational level, Beloved mirrors the traumatization of Denver and Sethe. She is a product of slavery, deprived of basic human rights, by and like her mother, and forever trapped in a state of immaturity like her sister. Even in life, Beloved existed as a symbolic part of Sethe. In murdering her young daughter, Beloved, “Sethe extends her right over her own body—the right to use any means, including death, to protect... the ‘parts of her’ that are her children” (Wyatt 476). This insight acts as a literal justification for this interpretation of Beloved’s character and how she functions. Before, during, and after her death, Beloved is an extension of her mother. Critic Wyatt presents a new angle on this issue, emphasizing the nature of the overlap between the female characters. He writes, “what at first appears symbolic becomes actual in a characteristic collapse of metaphor into literal reality—a slippage that accompanies the central materialization of the novel, Beloved’s embodiment” (Wyatt 480). This in-betweenness, a characteristic also seen in Sethe’s coping process and Beloved’s existence as both dead and alive, opens the door to the possibility that Beloved represents not just one being, but the fragmented parts of multiple traumatized women. Wyatt himself validates this, later pairing his explanation of Beloved’s memories with the phrase, “the boundaries between persons are permeable, permitting a join” (481). While Beloved exists as her own character, she also exists as the collection of many foreign parts, carrying the effects of Sethe and Denver’s diverse psychological trauma.

Beloved’s role as the reflection of her family members’ trauma appears most obvious in Denver’s shifting loyalties and the role reversal between Beloved and Sethe. Morrison explicitly identifies the start of this process in choosing to have all three women speak at once, including references to each woman’s respective trauma. This reads, “don’t even leave me again. You will never leave me again...I drank your blood. I brought your milk...I loved you. You hurt me” (Morrison 256). As demonstrated by the different traumatic incidents referenced here, Beloved takes on the trauma of both Denver and Sethe. Most explicitly, this series of sentences references the drinking of Beloved’s blood, Sethe’s fixation on breast milk, and Beloved’s fear of abandonment. “Beloved exists as a repository of unresolved feelings” (Koolish 175). She is the embodiment of many aspects of her mother and her sister, reflecting both their emotional and psychological characteristics. Beloved’s reflection of Sethe and Denver’s split selves allows them to escape their cycle of stagnation.

This passage also shows Morrison’s use of Beloved’s relationships to push the boundaries of the representation of psychological trauma. “The point of view chosen for the classic narrative...has limitations; it is the story of a single point of view” (Hamilton 436); however, Morrison shifts between multiple

narrative voices to expand upon the fluidity of identities. Critic Osagie further analyzes this concept, writing, “this reluctance to distinguish between self and other, inside and outside, hints at Morrison’s deliberate attempt to give her plot an... ‘indeterminate’ status” (436). This ambiguity, much like that of this section’s narrative voice, is actually reflective of the fact that Beloved is not, in fact, a definable individual, but rather reflective of three overlapping women.

Eventually, Beloved exceeds her role as a psychological embodiment and attempts to adopt Sethe’s role, beginning to physically and characteristically resemble her. As a result, a drastic shift occurs in Denver’s loyalties, forcing her out of her childlike role. Beloved is mistaken for Sethe multiple times in the novel. In this way, Morrison makes Beloved both a metaphorical and literal reflection of Sethe. The most obvious tie between Sethe’s trauma and Beloved relates to the role of motherhood in Sethe’s life. Motherhood and pregnancy are Sethe’s motivations for escape, but also the trigger for Beloved’s murder. Motherhood and Denver’s birth are also the primary narrative connections between mother and daughters, as emphasized by the reappearance of Denver’s birth story throughout the novel. This makes Beloved’s illusory pregnancy especially significant. In the additional context of Sethe and Paul D’s discussion about having another baby, Beloved’s pregnancy represents Sethe’s inner-conflict about motherhood (Koolish). Beloved lacks Sethe’s guttural tie to motherhood; however, because she holds a part of Sethe within herself, “her mother’s desire becomes her own” (Osagie 429). This leads to Sethe’s decline and a more concrete role reversal as expressed in statements like, “it was as though her mother had lost her mind” (Morrison 282) and “[Beloved] imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body” (Morrison 283). Sethe’s gradual separation from reality both breaks down Sethe’s character to a point of self-realization and allows Denver to move from childhood to adulthood.

While Denver’s traumatization has left her trapped in childhood, Beloved’s demanding nature forces Denver to step out of this role for the sake of her own and her family’s survival. Literary critic Hinson writes, “Denver too exchanges roles with her mother, becoming the caretaker to her dependents” (156). Sethe and Beloved are trapped in an in-between state. As Sethe fights to defeat her past trauma, she also loses her strength in a fight against Beloved. During this process, Denver transitions from a childlike figure to the primary caretaker of her entire family. Upon Beloved’s arrival, Denver acts fiercely protective, caring for Beloved even to her own decline. Morrison expresses this level of devotedness in the line, “so intent was [Denver’s] nursing, she forgot to eat” (Morrison 64). Fiercely attached to Beloved’s companionship, Denver feels the need to protect her and the attention Beloved provides. “The repetition of the word ‘mine’ in the monologues of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved suggests exactly this sort of possession and incorporation of the other as an object” (Schapiro 202). However, as Sethe declines, Denver transitions to protecting her mother. The novel explicitly states this, reading, “the job she started out with, protecting Beloved

from Sethe, changed” (Morrison 286). The turning point in this defensiveness occurs when Sethe is strangled. While *Beloved* insists this was not her doing, Denver quickly recognizes her as a destructive force in Sethe’s life. This change in perspective, and the desire to protect another person altogether, allows Denver to mature beyond her traumatization.

While *Beloved* transforms her co-characters, Morrison reshapes the presentation of psychological trauma in literature through *Beloved*. As both a symbolic and physical manifestation of their fragmented, dissociated selves, *Beloved* releases Sethe and Denver to process their traumatic pasts. Sethe is traumatized by both slavery and motherhood and her consequential actions, namely *Beloved*’s murder, also traumatize Denver. Morrison highlights the effects of this trauma through a loss of time, linguistic slips, and the characters’ preoccupation with the oral stage. *Beloved* makes an ambiguous appearance midway through the novel, mirroring and building upon this trauma. As the novel progresses, she increasingly resembles Sethe. In this, *Beloved* necessitates Denver’s transition into the role of caretaker, allowing Sethe to escape the struggles and trauma she associates with motherhood. *Beloved*’s embodiment of Sethe and Denver’s traumatization allows them to move beyond the moratorium forced upon them by slavery and murder. While *Beloved* never fully establishes herself as an individual, her role as the physical embodiment of Sethe and Denver’s broken selves provides a figure to carry the burdens of Morrison’s main characters so they can truly begin their adult lives.

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