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## **Beloved: A Twist in Time**

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Toni Morrison's *Beloved* firmly delves into the horrific history and after effects of slavery. Many craft elements are used in this novel, but Morrison carefully and tactfully implores flashbacks to examine the past of the novel's primary and secondary characters. The flashbacks in this novel are presented as the memories and stories of many characters. Morrison finely uses flashbacks to manipulate time in the present story. In result, the past serves to invade the consciousness of these characters. Morrison utilizes flashbacks as a stylistic and craft element, not just a literary device to show readers that flashbacks are their own story. In doing this, she is also using this literary tool to enlighten audience that the overall purpose of this novel is to show what slavery felt like and the weight it still carries in American History by framing flashbacks as the here and now story.

Immediately, in the opening, Morrison is manipulating time. She structures the past exposition of the novel to explain the present events. For example, in the first paragraph, the fourth sentence states, "by 1873, Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims"(Morrison 3). This sentence establishes a window into the past of the novel because of the personification given to this house. The house seems to operate like a character rather than a setting. The next few paragraphs tell how "Baby Suggs," "Howard," and "Buglar" evaded the ghost before 1873. Reader's can pick up that the novel's shift in time will be vital to understanding these characters. The fifth sentence says, "The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time there were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was it for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard)"(Morrison 3). While the fourth sentence conveys that the present time is 1873, because of the following sentences' information, it is implied that the past will periodically conflict with the present because it makes mention of Howard and Buglar's departure due to the houses' supernatural presence. In the sentence it mentions the words "periods," "weeks," and "months." These indicator words let readers know to watch for changes in time. Another firm example of this is on page five with the tactile description "No more powerful than the way I loved her," Sethe answered and there it was again. The welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones..."(Morrison 5). The phrasing of "and there it was again," serves as a mark that this entering a flashback. These phrases are poignant in identifying moments of time shift.

Author, Jessica Morrell notes in Chapter six of her book *Between the Lines: Master the Subtle Elements of Fiction Writing* that "entering flashbacks and immediate events create a series of doorway's that take the reader deeper into the story and the protagonist's psyche, enriching the whole, but also delaying the story's crescendos until the last possible moment" (Morrell 81). Moments such as these in flashback also color the event for the reader. Morrell explains that whatever mood is set in the flashback will enlighten and heighten the tension of the present, especially moving into the next scene. This is true in *Beloved* when the narrative moves into the next flashback involving Baby Suggs. In this quick flashback she discusses with Sethe why it's no use to move and find another home. Baby Suggs is putting their situation into perspective when she says, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (Morrison 5). It reminds readers that though this family and their history are traumatic, they are not alone. These sequences of flashback show readers how one mood being Sethe's guilt over Baby Suggs can influence the next flashback that is told.

Flashbacks can stand on their own in the novel because they are their own stories. In *The Art Of Time In Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, Joan Silber talks about “time as subject.” She states, “because narrative shows events unfolding, time itself takes on its own subject matter” (Silber 83). Successful flashbacks add layers to the present day story. When entering and exiting flashbacks at different moments it allows the novel to reflect on the memory process. This also includes memories that are spoken out-loud. Readers come to understand that flashbacks in the novel function to advance the plot, reveal something about the character, or raise the conflict level. For example, Sethe says, “She worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe.” (Morrison 6). This sentence reveals Sethe’s struggle with memory, and is foreshadowing her conflict later on in the novel in unlocking memories. The threat of not being able to remember is illustrated for Sethe on the next page when she describes an occasion of walking home. She says, “Nothing else would be in her mind...and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes...” (Morrison 7). In this moment Sethe experiences a flashback without a visible trigger. This shows how invasive and free-willed certain memories can be, especially those memories surrounding traumatic events. Even though she is of “empty mind” while just walking, a memory invades anyway. This demonstrates that memory can invade the consciousness almost on its own volition and not Sethe’s.

During the scope of the novel, Sethe’s confrontation with the past proves to be both damaging and effective. “Beloved’s” presence allow memories to surface that help Sethe understand her past and herself. For example, Beloved asks Sethe about diamond earrings she used to have. Sethe is puzzled, but does remember some crystals earrings she did have. Before readers enter the flashback Sethe notes that because Beloved is distant from the event and wants to hear it, it makes the memory more pleasurable for her and in turn is for the reader. Silber mentions that “being in the past for the good parts, makes us feel as if we were there” (Silber 18). Though memories are painful to the character, being in the past is a gateway to unlocking even more painful memories in flashbacks. For example, in chapter six, Beloved stimulates Sethe’s memory of her mother’s hanging. When she is separated from her mother Sethe remembers, “Right on her rib was a circle and cross burnt right in the skin” (Morrison 74). The mother tells Sethe that the mark is how Sethe can distinguish her from the other slaves. Though this made no difference because she was hanged. Sethe’s memory of the hanging is the first time Denver has ever heard about her grandmother. Sethe infers that because she did not know the African language when the woman Nan takes her, she remembers very little about life before Sweet Home. What is incredibly sad is the blank space in Sethe’s memory for the “forgotten language” of her life before Sweet Home. Since Sethe is unsuccessful in remembering the African language her mother spoke, it is a prudent part of her effort to suppress her memory of her mother because the African language represents the kind of cultural turmoil her mother and other slaves endured.

Beloved somewhat recovers that lost cultural history because she acts and is in many ways a conduit into the horrid past of slavery. The novel itself also reinforces a silenced part of American history to present day readers by containing the stories and memories of plantation slaves. The flashback of Sethe remembering Mrs. Garner giving her the earrings reminded Sethe of a motherly moment which triggered the flashback of her birth mother. Since these scenes happen one behind the other, they can be considered an example of “long time.” In *The Art of Time*, Silber comments that scenes such as these “render habitual action as if it were a single scene” (Silber 25). Though both are different flashbacks, one moment in the first flashbacks triggers the next. Both center around Sethe’s upbringing as a frightened little girl who had been torn from her mother into womanhood where she is about to marry Halle.

The novel also deals with direct flashbacks. This happens when the past events are told directly to the reader without present day comment from the person narrating or remembering the ordeal. Direct flashbacks occur because Beloved is a symptom of memory for all the characters. For example, Beloved hears Denver’s version of her birth. She empowers Denver to experience her own history as a physical and prompt “re-memory.” Denver has the ability to connect an intimate telling from her version and Sethe’s story of her birth. Beloved yearns for sensory details, so Denver accommodates her request, “like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved” (Morrison 92). The pleasure Beloved has in listening to Denver’s memory is the same pleasure Denver has in telling her version of the story. Much to Beloved’s liking it is filled with great points and details. For example, “the quality of Amy’s voice, her breath like burning wood. The quick-change weather up in those hills-cool at night, hot in the day, sudden fog (Morrison 92). While they enjoy this version of the story, an element of this storytelling is also troubling because reconstructed events in the mind exposes Denver to hurt. Subconsciously Denver thinks that her version is true, but it does not align with what she and the readers are told by Sethe. Denver is exposed, by Beloved, to the dire re-memories by creating her own version of her birth. These are the same memories Sethe tries to protect Denver from.

The drive to “overfeed” Beloved proves that the power of unrestricted memory excess haunts the love between both sisters. “Denver was seeing it now and feeling it-through Beloved”(Morrison 91).

Denver tells the story of her birth through a narrative synesthesia. It is filled with sensory images of sight, touch, and listening. Denver’s story signifies that she may have a better future because her story keeps the memory of Amy and the past alive in a positive way. Beloved’s openness to Denver’s story is a window to access the tactile reality of Sethe’s traumatic escape to freedom. Beloved’s inquisitiveness shapes how Denver responds to her because Denver now has to supply those sensory details that were lacking from Sethe’s story. This scene between Beloved and Denver is done without any present day comments. This is one of the examples in the novel where readers do not have to attempt to connect the past (Denver’s version) with the present day story, because this moment between both of them is more about understanding and being sympathetic to how Denver views the past.

Denver’s flashback of the version of her birth allows Morrison to show how empathetic recreating memory can have on Denver and Beloved’s relationship toward each other. The flashback is a collaborative effort on behalf of both of them. Denver’s use of particular words to create sensory detail breath life and shape to the incomplete version told by Sethe. The “scraps” her mother and grandmother impart onto Denver are given “blood” and a “heartbeat” through her narrative recreation. Both Beloved and Denver’s eagerness make their bond stronger in telling this story as a duo. The following pages display the actions of Sethe and Amy Denver, the night Denver was born. This flashback is told in direct speech, so it makes the reader trust the artistry of Denver’s story through Beloved. Both try their hardest to tell the version they believe to have happened which is clever of Morrison. The reader knows only Sethe knows the real truth to what actually happened but by breathing life, blood, and a heartbeat into Denver’s version, a re-memory is being opened to Sethe’s history that may unlock more painful memories. The more Sethe has warned Denver about re-memory, the more Denver wants to know. In the end, Morrison is enlightening readers that although memory serves to give some sort of verisimilitude, it presents complications as well, no matter what version of events are being told.

Certain flashbacks in the novel create a physical and emotional distance between the characters. For example, the aftermath of Paul D and Sethe’s sex scene. It states, “Half-dressed and short of breath, they lie side by side resentful of one another and the skylight above them”(Morrison 24). This scene is showing space between characters after a moment of intimacy. After having disappointing sex, Sethe and Paul D recall Sethe’s and Halle’s encounter in the cornfield twenty-five years ago. Paul D’s hasty, secret disgust toward Sethe’s scars suggests emotional distance. What is intriguing about this recollection of flashbacks is the mapping of their individual memories, of what is behind them, on their backs. Sethe’s back has visible scars of her whipping. To readers, there is one flashback of the same place, however, from two different perspectives. The narration begins to switch between two time periods, the present day in “Cincinnati” and the past at “Sweet Home.” “Sweet Home’s” past is explored from Paul D’s and Sethe’s perspectives, as the narrator’s focal point moves between both characters. This appears to be another aspect of flashback, connecting two people to the same places, but the distance of their experiences hinders them mentally and physically.

Another contrast of flashback between Sethe and Paul D is Sethe’s escape from “Sweet Home” versus Paul D’s story. The entirety of chapter ten is a flashback of Paul D’s life from the time he is bound to a wagon and taken away from “Sweet Home” to the time he gains his freedom in Delaware. This chapter only resurfaces in the present time in the last short paragraph, when Paul D puts all the memories into the “tobacco tin of his chest”(Morrison 133). Paul D has nowhere to turn once he has his freedom, while Sethe is driven to arrive at 124 Bluestone to be with her family. The Georgia prison camp is horrible and dehumanizing. Paul D is chained to fellow prisoners, sealed in a cell underground, and sees other prisoners forced into performing oral sex on the savage prison guards, and made to endure tortuous labor with fieldwork. The only relief to the misery is the solidarity he feels with the other prisoners. This flashback shows the complete opposite of what would and could happen without family to fight for because Paul D only escapes from prisoner life due to a risky plan of escape. In the end, some of his fellow friends did not make it. Readers can pick up the intention Morrison reveals with slavery that family is made not born. Since the prisoners are not granted permission to speak to each other, they interact through songs and gestures. When nasty weather turns the earth to mud, the prisoners plan their escape as a unit, diving to freedom through the mud.

The unification of the group emphasizes another point of slavery. It seems that Morrison's message is that people can best fight oppression if they act in harmony together. If Morrison did not show this scene in flashback, readers would not be able to grasp the complex picture of how Paul D's turmoil represents a cultural affliction that slaves endured.

In gathering groups such as the prisoners, the community Baby Suggs assembles in congregation aspires hope for a better future. In chapter nine, Sethe thinks about the how peaceful 124 used to be with Baby Suggs. Through vivid and intimate imagery she imagines Baby Suggs caressing her neck when she says, "Nine years without the fingers or the voice of Baby Suggs was too much" (Morrison 101). At the "Clearing," Baby Suggs preaches to everyone. She tells them that grace can only come to them if they imagine it for themselves. She says, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass" (Morrison 103). The personification of the word "flesh" allows readers to feel like they are part of the congregation as well and that Baby Suggs is talking directly to the reader. Silber notes that in flashbacks "we want to hear what people are saying, we want to see their faces while they're saying it--we want intimacy with the characters" (Silber 20). Also, this flashback in the middle of the novel serves as a plot function for Sethe to move on with life without Paul D. It occurs when Sethe is alone and thinking how Halle could not be at 124 to comfort her during the ghostly whispers. It can be implied that this flashback to Baby Suggs and the "Clearing" propel Sethe's character to not dwell on not being comforted while remaining at 124. In *Between the Lines* Morrell notes that when flashbacks occur in the middle of the novel "conflict and motivation intensify as problems worsen for the protagonist" (Morrell 92). If Sethe did not think about this time at 124 that kept her going, readers would not have this important flashback sequence in chapter nine.

Perhaps the most interesting flashback is in chapter sixteen because it is one of the rare chapters told from an outsiders perspective. This chapter details the night Schoolteacher, his nephew, the slave catcher, and sheriff who confront Sethe, just after she has murdered Beloved and attempting to kill the rest of her children. What is intriguing about this chapter is that it connects to the previous one. After Baby Suggs feels something wicked in the air, chapter sixteen happens just twenty-eight days after Sethe's arrival. This is a subtle example of how Morrison is uniquely playing with time by bringing readers back to a certain point in the past and progressing in time chronologically and through multiple points of view. The flashback in chapter sixteen shows how the four horsemen's disruption renders all peace for the protagonist and 124. This flashback also catches readers off guard because most of it is narrated from the Schoolteacher's perspective. Early in the novel, readers learn what transpired and are taken on Sethe's emotional journey and up until this point readers are on Sethe's side. Providing the schoolteacher's perspective allows readers to be distant from the event. Readers need to be on the outside looking in because we must see Sethe engaging in this brutal act and many readers may change their viewpoint of Sethe. Maybe some readers will note what Paul D said about her having two feet, not four. If this chapter had been told from Sethe or Baby Suggs perspective, it would have not had the haunting element that it did. Morrell says that, "The more haunting the memory or flashback, the more intense the emotion" (Morrell 81). Having the Schoolteachers perspective allows readers to visualize the heinous nature of the physical act.

The Schoolteacher's perspective is subjective in his vivid details of the night. For example, "Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a bloody-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other...she simply swung the toward the wall..." (Morrison 175). Witnessing this act from schoolteacher's perspective shows readers the lengths Sethe went to in order to change the outcome of a doomed future. Once again, this scene is a reminder of what Morrell talks about when flashbacks color the nature of the present. This may be the first time readers really stop and think about this act that Sethe did and whether people come to any conclusion if it was right or wrong. In Morrison's attempt to build a collective voice within these flashbacks, perhaps the most important flashback told from schoolteacher's perspective comes as a surprise to the readers because at this point, in the middle of novel, Morrison decided to change and play with the narrative.

Morrison interestingly writes flashbacks as a window into the past for understanding. She illuminates why time is a pivotal craft element in writing. Silber says, "One of the mysteries of craft is how the novel's written largely in scene has a plot that happens to depend on the past" (Silber 13). The plot of *Beloved* unravels in present day through the complex weaving of multiple flashbacks. Intricate details that Morrison utilizes of craft show how the past affects the present. Also, the flashbacks are inserted at just the right times. They are never forced without importance. Morrell notes that positioning flashbacks are crucial because, "intrusions from the past must always be justified" (Morrell 90).

Readers are proud of Morrison because she accomplishes what flashbacks primary goals are, which are to bridge time, place, and action, to reveal a past emotional event and physical conflict that affects these characters. The flashbacks give insight and understanding into these characters behaviors and help solve mysteries of the past. Flashbacks in *Beloved* connect the fragmented generations of former slaves by illuminating multifaceted images. In result, it creates a fine narrative strategy of the novel. Mostly, the flashbacks provide a pathway into self-healing process for Sethe and the readers in result of the horror hundreds of years of slavery have imparted on human beings.

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### Bio

Tyrell is a native of Atlanta Georgia. He has his MFA from Columbia College Chicago and Bachelor of Arts in English from Dillard University in New Orleans Louisiana. Tyrell is currently a PhD student in English Rhetoric & Composition at Georgia State University. He is working on his novel in progress, 'Walking Memories.' His forthcoming work can be seen in *Obsidian: Literature and Arts in the African Diaspora*." His work has also appeared in 'Hair Trigger 40', 'The New Engagement Art and Literature Journal,' the 'Unlost Journal of Found Poetry,' 'Don't Talk to Me About Love Magazine,' and 'Punctuate, a Nonfiction Magazine.'