# Transfiguring the Narrative: *Beloved*—from Melodrama to Tragedy

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Toni Morrison has repeatedly identified herself a black female author whose work should not be judged or interpreted by comparison to the established canon of European and American white literature. "It's very important to me that my work be African-American," she told Elisa Schappell in a 1993 interview. "[I]f it's assimilated into a different or larger pool, so much the better. But I shouldn't be *asked* to do that."[1] Yet Morrison's insistence on being perceived as an African-American woman writer is tempered by her disdain of literature that becomes "mere soapbox"—"or calculated or self-calculated or self-consciously black, because I recognize the artificial black writing some writers do. I feel them slumming among black people."[2] In contrast she attempts to "look at archetypes"[3], or, as she puts it, "to work with, to fret the cliche. . . . Most of the books that are about something—the books that mean something—treat old ideas, old situations."[4] By common consensus *Beloved* is one of those masterpieces that has entered the "larger pool," not despite its African-American roots but because of them. It remains a distinctly black, female novel of extraordinary power; but in Faulkner's memorable phrase, "it grieves on universal bones."

Like the work of other African-American authors, Morrison's writing echoes black oral and written traditions, especially that of the slave narrative, and the literary conventions of Western culture, which she subsumes, incorporates, reconstructs, and transfigures in her complex and multilayered texts. Most literary critics would concur with James Olney's claim that "the Afro-American literary tradition takes its start, in theme certainly but also in content and form, from the slave narratives."[5] Henry Louis Gates Jr. concludes that the slave narrative indeed provides "the very generic formulation which most subsequent African-American fictional and non-fictional narrative forms extended, refigured, and troped" and that the "self-consciousness of the ex-slaves" established "the formal basis upon which an entire narrative tradition has been constructed."[6] Morrison is of course fully aware of the pervasive

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influence of the slave narrative, and she has discussed *Beloved* as a reconstructed narrative giving voice to what the slave narrative necessarily silenced. In a 1986 talk titled "The Site of Memory," she observed that the milieu of the slave narratives "dictated their purpose and style." Although they employed the traits of the popular sentimental novel, they attempted "to appear as objective as possible—not to offend the reader by being too angry, or by showing too much outrage, or by calling the reader names."[7] Freed from the restrictions yet building on the conventions of the narrative, Morrison extends the dimensions of the genre. Jan Furman has aptly written that *Beloved,* despite its inventive and revisionist traits, "is continuing an unfinished script of slavery begun over two centuries ago by the first slave narratives. . . . an act of recovering the past in narrative."[8]

Though sometimes disagreeing about the number or authenticity of slave narratives, literary historians generally agree that the genre follows a basic paradigm, the central plot depicting the "melodrama and romance of the perilous journey north to freedom."[9] But whereas the first-person slave narrative tends to recount the essential physical and spiritual quest for freedom in linear or chronological order, Morrison's postmodern tale weaves past and present in a series of shifting reenactments and points of view. Morrison employs the narrative structure even as she transforms it, moving the locus of the action inside the self, which she labels the "interior self." Given the intent to trigger the moral outrage of white readers, the slave narratives manipulated polemical and political devices, especially, as Francis Smith Foster notes, "the imaginary plights of many sentimental heroines" that would appeal to "the heightened sensibilities of romantic females or any other mass audience."[10] The "self" that emerged tended to be prototypical, creating in the first-person narrator a communal, universal figure that "is on the periphery instead of at the center of attention, looking outside not within, transcribing rather than interpreting a set of objective facts." This "self," William L. Andrews goes on to say, shifted the focus from the individual slave to the institution of slavery: "[S]peaking too revealingly of the individual self . . . risked alienating white sponsors and readers, too."[11] Henry Louis Gates Jr. adds that the slave narrative was consequently a "communal utterance, a collective tale, rather than merely an individual's biography."[12]

Morrison, however, explores the "interior" in order "to rip [the] veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate.' " This "task" of exposing "memories within . . . both distinguishes my fiction from autobiographical strategies" operating in slave narratives, she has written, and "also embraces certain autobiographical strategies" (Morrison, "Site," 91–92). In effect, *Beloved* presents not only reconstructed memory but deconstructed history. In it Morrison recreates a past, however painful, in order to shatter the ideological basis upon which it has been constructed by the dominant culture, employing the realism of the slave narrative but disengaging it from mere historical record and revitalizing it as lived experience. She has called her use

of memory "willed creation . . . I wanted to translate the historical into the personal" (Schappell, 103).[13]

Although *Beloved* as an historical novel *is* "framed in purpose, thematics, and structure after the African-American slave narrative,"[14] it does not follow the narrowly prescriptive pattern of the genre. The novel shifts points of view from first- to third-person and from the external to the internal lives of its characters, relating historical events in multiple perspectives, revealing both the physical brutality of slavery and its devastating effects on the psychic development of characters, and avoiding the tendency toward melodrama and sentimentality typical in the slave narrative (depicting—in Robert Browning's phrase—"Action in Character, rather than Character in Action"). As Morrison and various critics have observed, *Beloved* articulates what the slave narratives could not speak, given their overtly polemical or propagandistic agendas. It explores not so much the communal disaster of slavery at large as its deepest personal consequences, converting powerful and meaningful melodrama into high tragedy, amalgamating and modifying the elements of seemingly contradictory genres.

Close reading of all of Morrison's fiction leaves "little doubt," Lillian Corti accurately concludes, "that she is quite conversant with the world of tragedy."[15] We can trace in her fiction the convergence of her knowledge of classical tragedy, possibly gained in large measure while completing a classics minor at Howard, and an insistent "black consciousness." Morrison noted in a 1981 interview with Bessie Jones that her intersecting interests were not encouraged when she was an undergraduate at Howard. She recalled that her desire to write a paper on black characters in Shakespeare "horrified" her professors because they "thought it was a sort of lesser topic." At the time, she noted, Howard was "very sort of middle class, sort of upwardly mobile and so on" (Jones, 131). Yet as early as her interview with Bessie Jones in 1981, she remarked that "Greek tragedy . . . seems to me extremely sympathetic to Black culture and in some ways to African culture" (142). Her own work is, in Gates's term, "double-voiced," reflecting both Western and African American traditions. Though decidedly committed to writing authentic African American literature, she acknowledges, "I write [in] what I suppose could be called the tragic mode in which there is some catharsis and revelation. There's a whole lot of space in between, but my inclination is in the tragic direction" (LeClair, 28).[16] When she left Howard to become "a naive teacher" at Texas Southern University, she apparently recognized the relevance of great tragedy to the black experience. Speaking of her commitment to teaching undergraduates, she reflected in the 1993 interview with Elissa Schappell, "I've always thought that the public schools needed to study the best literature. I always taught *Oedipus Rex* to all kinds of what they used to call remedial or developmental classes. . . . You have to give them the best there is to engage them" (Schappell, 122).[17] It is little wonder then that *Beloved,* while it defies simple generic labels, combines the features of tragedy with the rich tradition of slave literature. While inverting, qualifying, or violating the strict architectonic model of what Aristotle defined as high tragedy, *Beloved* maintains its essential vision and shaping characteristics, while at the same time tapping and modifying the resources of the slave narrative.



Clearly a "hybridized text—part ghost story, part historical novel, part slave narrative, part love story"—combining generic forms that "coexist uneasily, in a state of tension, if not antagonism," *Beloved* "can be seen both as tragedy, involving a mother's moment of choice, and as a love story" unified by the "thematic glue" of the slave narrative, Carl Malmgren contends.[18] In attempting to integrate the features of the slave narrative in her tragic vision, however, Morrison carefully avoids the tendency toward melodrama that characterizes most slave narratives. She writes, "My vulnerability would be in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; villifying whiteness rather than reifying it."[19] Resisting the impulse to create what Robert Heilman calls "whole" characters in a melodrama, she projects in Sethe a classically "divided" heroine who, confronted with unresolvable opposites within, must choose against her "self."[20] The independent character who emerges achieves the authenticity and autonomy often denied the hero or heroine speaking autobiographically in the slave narrative. The teller of his or her story, as Houston Baker comments, can be totally obscured in the political and thematic qualities of the slave narrative genre. Once "subjected to the linguistic code, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population," the voice of the "unwritten self," whose story the narrative tells, is often co-opted, "a self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery."[21] In projecting the inner life of her heroine, Morrison rescues the authentic self, making Sethe the victim of her own divided nature and thereby making her capable of choice and, ultimately, of achieving tragic stature. Sethe's crossing the river into freedom marks the climactic victory of the slave narrative and the beginning of the potential for tragic action.

In her essay on *Medea* and *Beloved* Lillian Corti describes the similarities between the two works, the most obvious being the basic plots based on infanticide, the theme of hubris, and the use of the chorus. But in fact Morrison's novel is more essentially Sophoclean than Euripidean. To be sure, it is in some respects alien to Greek tragedy generally. It employs what Morrison calls "A-U-R-A-L" strategies, such as multivocal patterns, varying word rhythms, the blending of voices, and the subtle control of pauses and silences, rather than emphasizing the paradigmatic design of Greek tragedy, with its rigid trajectory of beginning-middle-end. Its postmodernism seems diametrically opposite the generic form of conventional tragedy. Nonetheless, the novel sustains tragic focus in its depiction of conflict within character, in its obsession with the presentness of the past, in its movement—however circuitous—toward reenactment, in its ritualistic elements, and in its ultimate ambiguity mirroring the "victory in defeat, defeat in victory" that ends high

tragedy. Its extraordinary vision incorporates the seminal ingredients of tragedy without violating either its open-ended postmodern texture or its distinctiveness as an expression of African American literature.

Morrison has denied the Euripidean nature of *Beloved,* telling Amanda Smith in an interview published at the same time as the novel that "[t]his is not Medea who kills her children because she's mad at some dude, and she's going to get back at him. Here is something that is *huge* and *very* intimate."[22] The reality is that Sethe must confront the consequences of her *own* action 18 years before Beloved is reincarnated. Like Oedipus, who is obligated to resolve the plague he has himself generated, she must be reconciled to the Fury that visits her in the form of her grown dead daughter. As Amy tells Sethe, "Can't nothing heal without pain, you know."[23] And the most painful act of all is that which Sethe most struggles to evade, the act of "re-membering," of going back to the point of offense that defines her greatest act of love and her most unforgivable "crime."

In describing Sethe's profound confrontation with memory, Morrison in some respects combines the intentions of antebellum and post-war slave narratives. Whereas in early narratives "slavery was depicted as hell on earth, a perverse, obscene, and highly destructive force that threatened to annihilate the selfhood of slaves," post-war autobiographies attempted "to reconstruct the image of blacks who endured it and survived with their individual dignity intact."[24] By means of her frequently shifting narrative, Morrison both captures the horror of slavery and constructs an independent tragic figure. Instead of depicting Sethe as the slave narrator who perceives herself as victim of and finally victor over the debilitating powers of a degenerate system, Morrison describes a "freed" woman who sees herself as victim both of slavery *and* of herself, as one who must tragically destroy her own "best thing" in order to save it. Through multiple points of view, Morrison at once widens and deepens the narrative of emancipation by reversing its unwavering movement toward freedom in repeated retellings expressed by different narrators, finally culminating in the remarkable "unspeakable things unspoken" passage of the novel. Constantly interrupting the chronological record of the inexorable journey toward freedom through shifts in time and voice, Morrison centers on the unresolved present, invoking a pattern of tragic rhythm while maintaining a dualistic vision in which events that precede the crossing into freedom reflect the characterization of the slave narrative and those that occur after the crossing initiate a pattern of tragic action.

Central to Morrison's vision is the female protagonist. Accusing Morrison of designing the novel "to placate sentimental feminist ideology, and to make sure that the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of victims doesn't weaken," Stanley Crouch claims that the novel fails to achieve "a true sense of the tragic."[25] In fact it transforms first-person historical narrative into what Hazel V. Carby calls "a remarkable exploration or re-visioning of the conventional historical narrative for representing slavery."[26] The



tradition of the female slave narrative undeniably surfaces in the work. Certainly one thinks of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* especially in that text's freeing of the first-person narrator from the domination of the sentimental novel in what Valerie Smith describes as its "ironies and silences."[27] The important point to be made is that the female slave autobiography not only allowed women to achieve heroic roles assigned conventionally to males but also to act independently. This empowerment of women directly relates to the potential for their gaining status as tragic figures. As long as the women were seen as secondary in importance and were represented only as victims of abuse, they lacked the possibility of obtaining tragic stature. Although bound by the limitations of the genre, Jacobs frees herself from the more melodramatic features of the sentimental novel in her autobiography. As Linda Brent she portrays herself not as mere victim but as someone capable of choice, though she stops short of projecting herself as a fully tragic heroine. She lacks tragic dimension not because she lacks strength or the ability to act but because she suffers no internal division that leads her to act against herself. In tragedy, Heilman notes, the protagonist must choose between opposing impulses or imperatives in the self. In the slave narrative the "enemy" is wholly evil and outside the self; in tragedy it is also within the self.

*Beloved,* though, is an intensely female work, structured in 28 minisec tions that parallel the female cycle. The ultimate "criminal" act in the novel i not only the singularly evil force of slavery but also the ambiguous act o infanticide committed by a mother driven by unrelenting love. The story c Margaret Garner as fictionalized by Morrison contrasts dramatically wit another work based on the slave narratives, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* in which infan ticide also occurs. According to Eileen Bender, Stowe's work virtually create "the peculiar institution of American slavery that has entered America mythology" through the essential melodrama—"exhortative, lugubriou part soap opera, bathetic, insufferably pious, peopled with racial stere types—white and black."[28] In portraying a similar world and placing infant cide at the matrix of the novel, however, Morrison evokes the realm tragedy by illuminating the unredeemable opposites that compel Sethe enact the deed. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* and generally in the slave narrative th inspired it, horrendous acts are committed by horrible people; in *Beloved* t horrific act of infanticide is attributable to a "free" woman who acts as a fr agent.

Like a tragic figure doomed to confront the truth, Sethe wars with h past, attempting to bury the memory of her outrageous act: "[S]he work hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (*Beloved,* 6). There w "[n]othing better than to start the day's serious work of beating back t past" (73); yet Sethe knows that memory "[c]omes back whether we want to or not" (14), that "if you go and stand in place where it was, it will happ again; it will be there waiting for you . . . even though it's all over—over a

lone with—it's going to always be there waiting for you" (36). Once she ıears "the click," when Beloved sings the song Sethe made up to sing her, ›ethe ironically assumes that Beloved's return signals the defeat of the past, hat she can "[t]hink about all I ain't got to remember no more" (182). 'Thank God," she naively thinks, "I don't have to rememory or say a thing ›ecause you know it all" (191). But there is no escape from the past. In tragic ·hythm every step forward is a step backward to the defining moment of the 'crime."

As in *Oedipus Rex* the plague is already present in *Beloved* when the story ›egins some 18 years after the infamous event. The house anguishes as a per-ıon that "wept, suffered, trembled and fell into fits" (29). Driven by the ;host, Buglar and Howard have long-since fled, Baby Suggs is eight years dead, and Denver is 18 when Paul D arrives in 1873. Chased out by Paul D, :he ghost returns as the reincarnated Beloved, whose appearance is described ıs a rebirth. Sethe sees her when she reenacts the birth process in the form of 'voiding" on the way to the outhouse, recalling how Amy told her to "[h]old ɔn" at Denver's birth: "But there was no stopping water breaking from a womb and there was no stopping now" (51). Beloved's "new skin, lineless and ;mooth," and "soft and new" hands signal her emergence "out of the water" (50). And as several critics have noted, the novel marks her aging as the tale unfolds. She is, as Denise Heinze comments, Sethe's alter ego, "nothing more or less than a memory come to life that has too conveniently been forgotten."[29] As Sethe discovers when she feels Beloved's hands choking her in the Clearing, "[T]he fingers that had soothed her before they strangled her had reminded her of something that now slipped her mind" (*Beloved,* 98). In her folk wisdom Ella tells Stamp Paid, "You know as well as I do that people who die bad don't stay in the ground" (188), and when Paul D catalyzes the action by triggering the ghost's transformation into the now 18- or 20-year-old Beloved, the past surfaces inexorably in the present and thrusts the action forward to the past in tragic irony.

Sethe's motherhood constitutes the nexus of the tragic vision in *Beloved;* it marks the essential difference between the melodrama that underlies the slave narrative and the possibility of tragic choice that transfigures melodrama into tragedy in Morrison's novel. In the slave community "motherhood" often became a bitterly ironic term because slave mothers did not own their children. They were breeders, like the cows and goats with which schoolteacher compares Sethe. Although historians observe that infanticide is infrequently recorded in official documents, it was likely more common than the written records show.[30] The attitude toward children expressed by slave mothers and the references to infanticide in *Beloved* indicate the prevailing irony of "motherhood." When Sethe is eight, Nan tells her that her mother "threw them all away but you. . . . You she gave the name of a black man. She put her arms around him" (62). Of Baby Suggs's eight children, she could only mother Halle, "the last of her children, who was barely glanced at when



he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you could never see change into adulthood anyway" (139). Locked in a room for more than a year, Ella was sexually abused by her master and his son, and she refused to nurse the "hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet' " until it died after five days "never making a sound" (258–59). For all these women motherhood is indeed a bitter irony. Yet, as Jan Furman writes, Morrison renders Sethe "almost completely as a mother." So long as she lives under the illusion that she *can* be a "mother" at Sweet Home, Sethe remains incapable of tragic action. Her escape, Furman concludes, "is Sethe's emphatic rejection of slavery's power to circumscribe her motherhood" (Furman, 70). But not until she crosses into freedom, thus completing the passage that serves as climax in slave narratives, can Sethe claim ownership of her children and acquire the capacity for choice that distinguishes high tragedy. Sethe tells Paul D, "Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off the wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to" (*Beloved,* 162). Sethe, Morrison told Marsha Darling in an interview, "*became* a mother" in consequence of being free; and she could then "claim responsibility for her children."[31] That ability and obligation to choose is the dividing line between melodrama and tragedy.

Paul D's reaction to Sethe's assertion of freedom as a woman-mother indicates his "slave" mentality. To put it another way, he still lives in the world of the slave narrative where characters are victims rather than free agents. Conditioned by the brutality of slavery, he fears risking such boundless assertions of love. Thinking as an imprisoned slave back in Alfred, Georgia, he knows that "[y]ou protected yourself and loved small." And he sees in Sethe's unqualified love the freedom he does not dare to risk, even though "[h]e knows exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you choose . . . well now, *that* was freedom" (162). Psychologically speaking, he cannot "cross over" and sees danger in "a used-to-be-slave woman" loving "anything that much . . . especially if it were her own children she had settled on to love" (45).

Paul D cannot escape the compromising power of slavery that forces him to hold love in reserve in the "tobacco tin" at his heart; but Sethe's "rough choice" is a consummate if paradoxical act of love. Morrison pointed out in a television interview with Bill Moyers that Margaret Garner's case became a cause célèbre for abolitionists because they thought if she were tried for murder, "[I]t would have been assumed she had some responsibility over those children because she owned the rights of a free person."[32] In the novel Mr. Bodwin remembers how the abolitionists vainly attempted "to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case for abolishing slavery" (260), only to see Sethe charged under the Fugitive Slave Act for the "real crime" of stealing property. In Morrison's adaptation of the story, infanticide is paradoxically a conscious act of murder . . . and of love. Sethe acts

freely of her own will, and, as Carol E. Schmudde concludes, she is "morally responsible for her act." Schmudde perceptively adds that it is only the white characters of schoolteacher and Mr. Bodwin who deny Sethe's "choice" and diminish her as a character. Schoolteacher demeans her as incapable of choice and Bodwin excuses her as a helpless victim; "neither judgment assumes that Sethe herself is a fully responsible moral agent" (Schmudde, 124).[33] To acquire tragic stature, Sethe must be saved from innocence, from victimization that disallows choice or the ability to take on the full responsibility and consequences of choice.

It is her classical sin of pride that from the first alienates Sethe from the community of ex-slaves, a pride Baby Suggs first detects when she smells "the scent of disapproval" of the "uncalled-for pride" at the feast to celebrate the coming of Sethe and the children. Even then she wonders, "Why didn't Sethe get on board too?" along with the her children. "Nobody could make it alone" (135). Sethe does indeed exert "outrageous claims" of her "self-sufficiency" that extend to the end of the narrative, when she steals items from Sawyer's restaurant because "the pride made pilfering better than standing in line at the window of the general store with all the other Negroes" (191). At the scene of the infanticide, when the women look at Sethe carrying baby Denver out of the barn, the child sucking her sister's blood along with the milk at Sethe's breast, they ask, "Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably" (152). As Stamp Paid tells Paul D, "Pride, well, bothers em a bit. They can get messy when they think somebody's too proud" (232).

Nonetheless, Sethe's hubris is akin to that of Oedipus, whose ego defines both his heroism and his villainy. His pride is at once the source of his victory and defeat. It makes him a magnificent king and a magnificent criminal. Even to the very end when he gouges out his eyes, he goes the gods one better. Sethe, too, gains tragic stature not despite her commanding selfhood but because of it—it both magnifies and diminishes her. In the free North, "Bit by bit . . . she had claimed herself" (75). The 28 days of freedom, also symbolic of the female cycle, prove enough time to acquire the tragic ability to enact her will: "All taught her how it felt to wake at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day" (95). To be sure, this is no Medea whose pride as lover is pricked by her lover's indifference and demands revenge. Sethe is catalyzed into action by the riotous love of a *freed* mother who acts as daringly as any man in the male slave narratives and who, in so doing, is self destructive. As Paul D unwittingly recognizes, such possessive motherlove is indeed a killer. Sethe proudly proclaims her free choice: "I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that" (162). She keeps repeating to Paul D that "it was me doing it. . . . Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before" (162). Without Halle, she boasts, she saved the children: "Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided" (162). What frightens Paul D is



not "what Sethe had done" but "what she claimed" (164), the total possession of a freed woman-mother who "talked about safety with a handsaw" (164). Sethe first intended to kill everyone, including herself, but her "response—homicide rather than suicide—belongs to freedom, not to slavery," Missy Kubitschek writes insightfully (Kubitschek, 168). However regretful Medea may be to sacrifice her children, we never see her as truly divided within herself; and once she acts, she accepts no blame, welcoming the *deus ex machina* that rescues her from the consequences of judgment, and especially self-judgment, as a just recompense for her suffering. But Sethe, far more like Oedipus, accepts full responsibility for her actions and suffers the full consequences of her willful act. There is complicity on Sethe's part that Medea never entertains and that the heroine in the conventional female slave narrative lacks. It is this dimension in *Beloved* that makes it more than a melodrama. No mere chronicle of good and evil, *Beloved* exceeds the dualism of schoolteacher, who divides "reality" into neat opposing columns. As Baby Suggs understands, good and evil cannot be simplistically defined, and she herself cannot "approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice" (*Beloved,* 180). Infanticide was "absolutely the right thing to do," Morrison has remarked, "but she had no right to do it."[34]

Stanley Crouch argues that *Beloved* does not achieve "a true sense of the tragic" because Morrison lacks "the courage to face the ambiguities of the human soul, which transcend race" (Crouch, 43). Nothing could be further from the truth. At one point Paul D alludes to Sethe's face as "a mask with mercifully punched-out eyes" (*Beloved,* 9), an oblique reference to Oedipus suggesting that Sethe *fully* participates in "ambiguities of the human soul." As with other Morrison characters who commit outrageous acts of love, Sethe must pay a price. Like Eva Peace who must watch her beloved Hannah die in a fire after she embraces, anoints, and burns her hapless son Plum, Sethe too must endure the consequences of a loving act of infanticide. In Jan Furman's words, "[E]ven righteous crimes such as Sethe's have a reckoning" (Furman, 82). Ironically, Sethe insists she does not *have* to justify her act, and yet she keeps trying to explain that "if I hadn't killed her she would have died" (*Beloved,* 200). She is consumed by guilt, yet she cannot confess to a crime. She seeks forgiveness, yet Denver senses her "luxuriating" in *not* being forgiven: "Sethe didn't really want forgiveness, she wanted it refused" (252). Even in the magnificent "unspeakable things unspoken" section of the novel, when Sethe asks "Do you forgive me?" and "pleads for forgiveness, listing again and again her reasons" (241–42), she wants understanding rather than forgiveness. Her pride at possessing "what it took to drop the teeth of that saw under her chin" (251) will not allow a willful confession of murder. To be forgiven would be an admission of guilt for a transcendent act of love; and yet such destructive love—even motherlove—demands retribution. Sethe cannot escape the past or excuse it. Few modern works of literature convey the ambiguities of the human soul with such uncompromising authority.

It is Denver who understands the retribution that is occurring and who alone can move the action toward tragic resolution. As she witnesses the merger and reversal of mother and child in Sethe and Beloved until "it was difficult . . . to tell who was who" (241), she knows that Sethe is "trying to make up for the handsaw" and that Beloved is "making her pay for it" (251). In a desperate attempt "to be the two of us" (213) Beloved consumes Sethe, usurping the mother role as Sethe embodies "the teething child" (250), and Denver becomes the agent of reconciliation, as originally symbolized by her simultaneously sucking her mother's milk and Beloved's blood. Early on Baby Suggs recognizes the baby ghost as a supernatural force that has come, like a Greek Fury or a vengeful ghost in a Renaissance tragedy, to exact retribution. She assures Denver that there is nothing to fear. Denver knows "[i]t wouldn't harm me because I tasted its blood when Ma'am nursed me" (209). As the child born in freedom on the river, Denver discovers the ability to act. Just as Beloved represents all the suffering children of slavery as she speaks of the horror on the Middle Passage, Denver acquires mythic proportion. If Beloved is the daughter of history, the victim of slavery that can warp even motherlove, then Denver, as Ashraf Rushdy notes, "is the site of hope" (Rushdy, 571). According to Rushdy, Beloved and Denver are polar opposites, one the incarnation of Sethe's "guilt" and the perniciousness of slavery, and the other the symbol of transforming love, or, in Eusebio L. Rodrigues's words, "the child of the race . . . the seed 'in which the whole generation sleeps confident of the future.' "[35]

Even from the first, Denver realizes that she plays a role in a larger drama—"like a bill [were] owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it" (*Beloved,* 77). At first fearing "there is something else terrible enough to make" her mother commit her "killer love" again, Denver exhausts her "outside self loving Ma'am" to keep her mother from killing her. Yet even in her fear she senses love in her mother's potential for violence. "I know she'll be good at it, careful. . . . it won't hurt," Denver thinks as she contemplates Sethe cutting off her head (206). Gradually, Rushdy concludes, Denver comes to understand "that because of a larger communal history, her mother's deed might not be so heinous as she first thought" (Rushdy, 583). As Beloved's presence drives Sethe back to the point of offense, it compels Denver toward the future. Finally realizing that "[i]t's all on me" (*Beloved,* 206), Denver must risk the ritual of death and rebirth so elemental in traditional tragedy: "[S]he has to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn't they all would" (239). Baby Suggs had told her she must confront the truth even knowing "there was no defense . . . Know it, and go on out of the yard" (244). Part of the triad that comprises a composite tragic heroine, Denver leaves 124 Bluestone a dozen years later, armed with some awareness of her mother's unrestrained love and its frightful consequences, to seek the equilibrium that can only be restored when she has "told it all" and entrusted herself to the larger community to which the tragic figure always returns.



Freeing herself of her own pride, and not possessing the alienating pride of Sethe, Denver reestablishes the link with the community that takes form as the tragic chorus at the end of the novel. In her 1984 essay titled "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison says of her works, "[T]he chorus has changed but there has always been a choral note. . . . The real presence of a chorus. Meaning the community or the reader at large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead."[36]

Finally, in Denver's attempt to be restored to the community through dissolving "the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124," the chorus led by Ella finds its own culpability "for the years of their own disdain" (249). Resurrecting the communal services at the Clearing, the chorus cries, "Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it" (258), and steps back to the beginning, where no word is spoken. And when the women find "the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words . . . it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (261).

The moment of catharsis culminates as Sethe symbolically returns like Oedipus "to the crossroads," the ending point of her "rememory" and the defining moment in her life. When Edward Bodwin arrives wearing a hat that for Sethe marks him as schoolteacher come to take "her best thing," she once again manifests her fierce will. As I have written elsewhere, she sees Bodwin as a "man without skin" looking at her "with a whip in his hand" (262), and identifies him with "the men without skin" Beloved recalls on the Middle Passage, with schoolteacher's sadistic nephews, and with the guards who brutalize Paul D in Alfred, Georgia; to her he is the embodiment of slavery. Acting this time to save Beloved rather than inflict her criminal love on her daughter, Sethe at last exorcises the vengeful ghost that has come seeking retribution. Linda Krumholz emphasizes the ritual power of the scene: "As a freed woman with a group of her peers surrounding her, Sethe can act on her motherlove as she would have chosen earlier." In trying to kill the white man rather than her children in order to "save" them from a slavery worse than death, Krumholz notes, Sethe assaults the symbolic representative of the system. "The reconstruction of the scene of the trauma completes the psychological cleansing of the ritual, and exorcizes Beloved from Sethe's life."[37] The communal nature of the scene, underscored by the ritual choral cries of the women, and Denver stopping Sethe before she stabs Bodwin restore the wholeness and equilibrium shattered some 18 years earlier.

In various interviews Morrison has used the classical terms "epiphany" and "catharsis" to describe the endings of her works—"the sense of a combination of the restoration of order . . . and the character having a glimmering of some knowledge." She has said of her novels that "something important has happened . . . some knowledge is there—the Greek knowledge—what is the epiphany in Greek tragedy" (Jones, 135–36).[38] She has related Greek

tragedy to the open-endedness of African American folktales and, especially, jazz. Her books never reach total resolution, just as jazz "keeps you on edge. . . . There is no final chord. . . . There is something underneath that is incomplete."[39] Morrison also relates this element of her writing to "a strong influence of Greek tragedy."[40] Even though Sethe frees herself from the bonds of memory at the end and has come full circle in the traditional rhythm of tragedy, the ending remains uncertain. The novel ends not with completion but with the renewed possibility of choice as Sethe reaches a new dimension of freedom. "There is resolution of a sort," Morrison has commented in reference to her novels, "but there are always possibilities—choices." Self-recognition and the exorcising of the past do not resolve the suffering that "can't be undone. And in that sense [the ending] is Greek in the sense that the best thing you can hope for is some realization" and the awareness that "a certain amount of suffering is not just anxiety" (Jones, 136).[41] Unlike the heroine of the slave narrative whose story traces the painful but consummately victorious journey North, Sethe crosses into the ambiguous realm of tragedy, where she once again is free to choose and to bear the full weight of choice.

For all the reconstruction of history and inherent criticism of the prevailing myths of Western or American culture in *Beloved,* the novel places the community of African American characters in the larger context of classical tragedy. It weaves the themes and conventions of the slave narrative, particularly the female slave narrative, into the fabric of tragedy, expanding and deepening the narrative's universality and timelessness. The tragic understructure of the novel mirrors the achievement of the Thirty-Mile Woman, who, Sixo says, "gather[s] me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order" (*Beloved,* 272–73).

*Notes*

1. Elissa Schappell, "Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction CXXXIV," *The Paris Review* 128 (Fall 1993): 119. Hereafter cited in the text. In "Memory, Creation, and Writing," Morrison comments that she set out "to write literature that is irrevocably, undisputably Black" (*Thought* 59 [December 1984]: 389).

2. Claudia Tate, "Toni Morrison," in *Black Women Writers at Work,* ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983), 118. Morrison told Jane Bakerman in a 1977 interview that she resents the way black writers seem "always to explain something to somebody else!" ("The Seams Can't Show: An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Black American Literature Forum* 12 [1978]: 59). Referring to *The Bluest Eye* in the *The Paris Review* interview of 1993, Morrison noted that the commercially successful model for black fiction at the time she wrote her first major work was the typical male novel based on " 'Let me tell you how powerful I am or how horrible you are,' or some version of that" (Schappell, 99).

3. Bessie W. Jones, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," in *The World of Toni Morrison,* ed. Bessie W. Jones and Audrey L. Vinson (Dubuque, Ia.: Kendall/Hunt, 1985), 138. Hereafter cited in the text.



4. Thomas LeClair, " 'The Language Must Not Sweat,' *The New Republic,* 21 Marc 1981, 26. Hereafter cited in the text. Morrison also remarked to Claudia Tate that "[a] goc cliché can never be overwritten; it's still mysterious. . . . the subjects that are important in th world are the same ones that have always been important" (Tate, 120–21).

5. James Olney, " 'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography an as Literature," *Callaloo* 7 (Winter 1984): 65. Reprinted in Charles T. Davis and Henry Lou Gates Jr., eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 148–75.

6. Davis and Gates, Introduction, xxxiii–xxxiv. Hereafter cited in the text.

7. Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft* *Memoir,* 2d ed., ed. William Zinnser (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1995), 87. Hereafter cited i the text.

8. Jan Furman, *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 1996), 80.

9. Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University o Massachusetts Press, 1987), 29. For a discussion of the correlation between the slave narrative and other paradigms of the spiritual journey, see Missy Dean Kubitschek, *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991). Hereafter cited in the text.

10. Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narrative* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 23.

11. William L. Anders, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 6.

12. Introduction to *The Classic Slave Narratives,* ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: A Mentor Book, 1987), x. Foster also describes the narrator as "the community self," an attempt to combine the individual with "the counter desire to be a symbol" of the repressed slave (Foster, 5).

13. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy describes *Beloved* as "an introjection into the fields of revisionist historiography and fiction" and the expression of "a reconstructive—critical and hopeful—feminist voice within the fields of revisionist historiography and contemporary fiction." ("Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" *American Literature* 63 [September 1992]: 568. Hereafter cited in the text.)

14. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Toni Morrison* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 95.

15. Lillian Corti, "*Medea* and *Beloved:* Self-Definition and Abortive Nurturing in Literary Treatments of Infanticidal Mothers," in *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment,* ed. Lilian R. Furst and Peter W. Graham (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 62.

16. Asked by Bessie Jones whether or not she detects the relationship between Greek tragedy and black experience in *Song of Solomon,* Morrison admitted simply, "Well, I do" (Jones, 134).

17. Interestingly, Gates argues that slave narratives perhaps most closely parallel the pattern and form of detective fiction; and *Oedipus Rex* is sometimes called the quintessential detective story in literature. As noted later, the going "back to the crossroads" in Sophocles's play mirrors the reenactment of the "crime" in *Beloved.* See Davis and Gates, xv.

18. Carl Malmgren, "Mixed Genres and the Logic of Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" *Critique* 36 (Winter 1995): 96. In addition to Malmgren and Corti's studies of *Beloved* as tragedy, see also Carol E. Schmudde, "Knowing When To Stop: A Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" *CLA Journal* 37 (December 1993): 121–35. Hereafter cited in the text. I am also indebted to Erik Styles who, under my direction, completed an unpublished Senior Research Seminar paper at Wittenberg University in 1996 treating Morrison's use of the slave narrative and tragedy.

19. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), xi.

20. Heilman fully describes and illustrates the distinctions between "whole" characters found in melodramas, or what he calls "disaster" plays, and the tragically divided hero in his often-cited study *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968).

21. Houston A. Baker Jr., "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave," in Davis and Gates, 253.

22. Amanda Smith, "Toni Morrison (*PW* Interviews)," *Publisher's Weekly,* 21 August 1987, 51.

23. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 79. Hereafter cited in the text.

24. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds., *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), xi–xii.

25. Stanley Crouch, "Aunt Medea," *The New Republic,* 19 October 1987, 40. Morrison has called the review not only "a misunderstanding, but . . . pernicious." (Cecil Brown, "Interview with Toni Morrison," *The Massachusetts Review* 36 [Autumn 1995]: 466). Various critics have attacked Crouch's now infamous review. See, for example, Roger Sale, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" *The Massachusetts Review* 29 (Spring 1988): 81–86.

26. Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanlove: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 143, note 42. Bernard Bell describes *Beloved* as "a neo-slave narrative of double consciousness . . . that speaks in many compelling voices and on several time levels of the historical rape of black American women and of the resilient spirit of blacks in surviving as people" ("*Beloved:* A Womanist Neo-Slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past," *The African American Review* 26 [Spring 1992]: 9).

27. Valerie Smith, " 'Loopholes of Retreat': Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,*" in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist,* ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 225. As Gates observes, as early as Mary Prince's 1831 autobiography women began to speak "*for* themselves," celebrating "their self-transformation into subjects, subjects defined by those who have gained a voice" (*The Classic Slave Narratives,* xv). Hazel Carby also emphasizes that as narrators female slaves represented themselves "as acting their own vision" and as able to "take over their own lives" (Corby, 36). Valerie Smith differentiates female from male narratives in which males depicted "themselves as isolated heroic subjects" and described the journey North not only as that "from slavery to freedom but . . . from slavehood to manhood" (Valerie Smith, Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* by Harriet A. Jacobs [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988] xxix).

28. Eileen Bender, "Repossessing *Uncle Tom's Cabin:* Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" in *Cultural Power/Cultural Literacy,* ed. Bonnie Braendlin (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1991), 130. In another comparison of *Beloved* and Stowe's novel, Cynthia Griffin Wolff offers a far more favorable view of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* See " 'Margaret Garner': A Cincinnati Story," *The Massachsetts Review* 32 (Fall 1991): 417–40. In contrast Lori Askeland argues that *Beloved* "[s]ets itself up as a remodeling of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that examines [conventional] ideology and revises it in a way that avoids reification of a patriarchal power structure" ("Dismantling the Model House in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Beloved,*" *American Literature* 64 [December 1992]: 787).

29. Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 176.

30. See especially Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 323–29, 456, note 58.

31. Marsha Darling, "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *The Women's Review of Books* (March 1988): 6. In reference to Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* which she compares to the slave narratives that inspired it, Morrison explains in *Playing in the Dark* that "slave mothers are not mothers; they are 'natally dead,' with no obligation to offspring or to their own parents" (20). Houston Baker Jr. notes that in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* "A new bonding of Afro-American humanity consists, for Brent [Harriet Jacobs], in the reunion of mother and child in freedom" (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984], 55).



32. Reprinted in *Conversations with Toni Morrison,* ed. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 272.

33. In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison attacks the canonical American literary tradition that describes African Americans as "other." "We are choices," she insists, not simplistically the white culture's alter ego or shadow (9).

34. Marvyn Rothstein, "Morrison Discusses New Novel," *The New York Times,* 26 August 1987, Y19. Morrison repeated the remark in an interview on the *MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour* on PBS television on 29 September 1987.

35. Eusebio L. Rodrigues, "The Telling of *Beloved,*" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 21 (Spring 1991): 84.

36. Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation,* ed. Mari Evans (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), 341. Among others who comment on Morrison's use of the Greek chorus in *Beloved,* see especially Schmudde and Heinze. William R. Handley relates "the function and communal aspect of African art" with "the Greek chorus, antiquated in the West, [which] sings its lines and unites the audience and the actors in a communal performance of a culture's understanding of itself" ("The House a Ghost Built: *Nomme,* Allegory, and Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" *Contemporary Literature* 36 [Winter 1995]: 698).

37. Linda Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" *African American Review* 26 (1992): 403.

38. See also her remarks to Cecil Brown that her books end in recognition—"a note of epiphany in which somebody learns something about his or her situation" (Cecil Brown, "Interview with Toni Morrison," *The Massachusetts Review* 36 [1995]: 462). In an interview with Anne Koenen Morrison similarly observed that "at the end of every book there is an epiphany, discovery, somebody has learned something that they never would otherwise" (" 'The One Out of Sequence': An Interview with Toni Morrison [New York, April 1980]," in *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture,* ed. Gunter H. Lentz [Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 1984], 213.)

39. Nellie McKay, "Interview with Toni Morrison," *Contemporary Literature* 24 (1983): 413–29.

40. Charles Ruas, "Toni Morrison," in *Conversations with American Writers* (New York: Knopf, 1995): 215–43.

41. Lillian Corti claims that the novel ends in "a mellow, comic quality that contrasts markedly with the stark outlines of the tragic denouement" and that "Sethe has a better chance of achieving the ancient ideal of moderation than the tragic heroine" (Corti, 73–74). But the novel concludes with a question mark and with Sethe bearing the devastating consequences of her action.