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## **Broken Branches: The Search for Ancestry in Toni Morrison's Novels "Song of Solomon" and "Beloved"**

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**BROKEN BRANCHES:**  
**THE SEARCH FOR ANCESTRY IN TONI MORRISON'S**  
**NOVELS SONG OF SOLOMON AND BELOVED**

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**A Thesis**  
**Presented to**  
**The Faculty of the Department of English**  
**The College of William and Mary in Virginia**

**In Partial Fulfillment**  
**of the Requirements for the Degree of**  
**Master of Arts**

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**Joan Potter Thomas**

**1991**

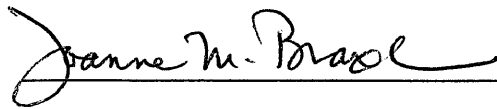
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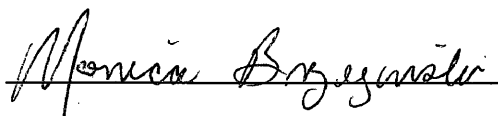
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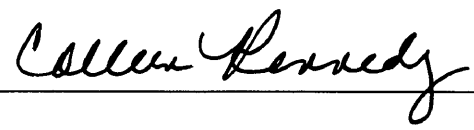
MASTER OF ARTS

  
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## ABSTRACT

In her essay titled "Rootedness," Toni Morrison writes: "When you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" (344).

This thesis analyzes Morrison's belief that maturation comes only with a complete understanding and acceptance of one's heritage. It explores the theme of ancestry in Morrison's novels Song of Solomon and Beloved, and examines the destruction of families due to slavery and the resulting difficulty African-Americans have when tracing their fragmented roots.

**BROKEN BRANCHES:**

**THE SEARCH FOR ANCESTRY IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS**

**SONG OF SOLOMON AND BELOVED**

by

Joan Potter Thomas

1991

In a 1987 interview with Miriam Horn, Toni Morrison discussed how the traditional definitions of family were dismantled by the institution of slavery. "Slavery depends on the absence of a family," she said. "You can't have families if you're going to have slavery because then you've got another family, then another, then a clan. People start getting furious and say 'Give me back my daughter. Give me back my wife.' So they had to destroy the family" (75).

Historians have studied this phenomenon and compiled statistics that document the difficulties many families had staying together under the stranglehold of slavery. Eugene Genovese notes that "many masters did not respect their slaves' family feelings and did not hesitate to sell them as individuals" (173), and Edward Frazier points out the complete disregard many slaveowners had for the emotional lives of their slaves: "There were masters who, without regard for the preferences of their slaves, mated their human chattel as they did their stock" (18). Similarly, Deborah Gray White writes that although marriage and children sometimes brought security for a slave couple, "the vagaries of a market economy and a slaveowner's death or peculiar whims were unpredictable factors that could result in the sale or permanent separation of a husband and wife" (159).

Because the loss of loved ones was so common, people caught in the bonds of slavery constantly feared that what family they had would be stripped from their lives. As

Genovese notes:

Perhaps no single hardship or danger, not even the ever-present whip, struck such terror into the slaves and accounted for so much of that 'fatalism' often attributed to them. If the spirit of many did crack and if many did become numb, nothing weighs so heavily among the reasons as the constant fear of losing loved ones. (73)

Regardless of the forced break-up of husbands and wives, parents and children, the family continued to be a fundamental structure in the lives of slaves. Paula Giddings writes that "In spite of the vagaries of the slave system, marriage, fidelity, and an organized family life were important values, combining the ethics of the society, African mores, and resistance to the new slavery" (45). The relationships between family members were important for individual self-identity, as slaves defined themselves in relation to others:

The family helped slaves resist total dependence on slave owners because it helped socialize bonded children, gave slaves familial roles to play, and thus enabled slaves to create an identity that went beyond that assigned by whites. (White 157)

Documented attempts by slaves to keep their families together are prevalent.

Almost every study of runaway slaves uncovers the importance of the family motive: thousands of slaves ran away to find children, parents, wives or husbands from whom they had been separated. Next to resentment over punishment, the attempt to find relatives was the most prevalent cause of flight. (Genovese 30)

Other slaves would plead with their masters to maintain families or stand up on the auction block and demand that their child be bought with them. Many would make personal sacrifices so that their families could stay together. Giddings examines one case of a woman who resists a "forcible mating" until her master "reminded her that he had purchased her entire family to save them from being separated." With this threat, the woman "upheld her end of the desperate bargain" and bore two children under her owner's demanding eye (46).

Yet despite heartrending attempts to keep families together, the inevitable separations and hardships took a terrible toll on the identities of slaves. Forced to live completely new lives in a new land, their cultural heritage consisted of fragmented folklore passed from one generation to another. Edward Frazier writes:

Old men and women might have brooded over memories of their African homeland, but they could not



change the world about them. Through force of circumstances, they had to acquire a new language, adopt new habits of labor, and take over, however imperfectly, the folkways of the American environment. Their children, who knew only the American environment, soon forgot the few memories that had been passed on to them and developed motivations and modes of behavior in harmony with the New World. Their children's children have often recalled with skepticism the fragments of stories concerning Africa which have been preserved in their families. But of the habits and customs as well as the hopes and fears that characterized the life of their forebears in Africa, nothing remains. (15-16)

The sharing of the little cultural history that was known was further stifled by the owners of these slaves. Slaveowners feared that the recollection of better lives would cause slaves to revolt. As Barbara Christian notes:

To acknowledge that slaves had memory would threaten the very ground of slavery, for such memory would take them back to a culture in Africa where they existed...Slave-owners were aware of the power of memory, for they disrupted generational lives of slaves in such a way that many slaves did not know even their own parents or children. (333)

Consequently, the ancestral history of slaves seldom goes back more than a few years. In fact, Christian writes that even as late as the nineteenth-century, "memory, when it does exist in African-American novels about slavery, goes back but one generation, to one's mother, but certainly not much further back than that" (333). Additionally, Christian, Amy Ghaemmaghami, and others note that many details are deleted from African-American slave narratives, novels, et al. because these works were read by white audiences and could prove to be dangerous to the authors if the true horrors of slavery were revealed.

Yet Toni Morrison suggests two more reasons for the lack of detail and generational span in the history of African-American families. First, in an address at The University of California at Berkeley in October 1987, Morrison suggested that many events in the lives of slaves and their descendents were just too painful and horrible to recall (Christian 329). Additionally, she also notes that there was a generation of post-World War II Americans who believed that a knowledge of their past--of slavery, racism, despair, etc.-- might stifle the dreams and hopes of future generations (Christian 329).

This fear and ignorance of the past intrigue Morrison, and they appear as major themes in much of her work. "The problem at the center of Morrison's writing is how to maintain an Afro-American cultural heritage once the relationship to the black rural South has been stretched

thin over distance and generations" (Susan Willis, Specifying 85). In the novels Song of Solomon and Beloved, Morrison tackles the ancestry of two African-American families that have ascended from slavery. In Song of Solomon, Milkman finds his identity only after discovering his ancestors. Similarly, in Beloved, Sethe and Denver must deal with the horrors in their own pasts in order to successfully handle their present and future lives.

Morrison presents these themes with particular attention to the details that authors of previous slave narratives and African-American novels had deleted. She demonstrates that these "forgotten" and consciously omitted facts are of equal importance to the stories that have remained a part of a family's heritage. Christian writes:

As we move into another century when Memory threatens to become abstract history, [Morrison] remind[s] us that if we want to be whole, we must recall the past, those parts that we want to remember, those parts that we want to forget.

(341)

Morrison believes that relatives and ancestors are "culture bearers" (Nellie McKay 415) and it is essential for people to listen to their family history in order to survive. She writes:

When you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-

reliant if there is no conscious historical connection. ("Rootedness" 344)

In Song of Solomon, published in 1977, Morrison deals directly with the theme of a young man's search for his roots. Milkman, caught in a repressive family and within conflicting social roles, finds his own identity only after he discovers his ancestral heritage. Although Milkman's search for the past begins as a quest for the material wealth that could be left by his relatives (a bag of gold), he discovers the real wealth of knowing from whom he is descended. As Willis points out "Milkman comes to realize that only by knowing the past can he hope to have a future" (Specifying 93).

Initially, Milkman has an incomplete self-image and is unsure of his family history because he is trapped with people who are unsure of their own identities and heritage. Macon Dead and Ruth, Milkman's parents, caught in a world full of class-consciousness and materialism, threaten to mold Milkman into a replica of themselves. "[Milkman] just wanted to beat a path away from his parent's past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well" (Song of Solomon 180). Yet breaking away is difficult when a material world is all Milkman knows.

This philosophy of materialism even extends to familial relationships as Macon treats Milkman himself as a piece of property. After Milkman discovers the mysterious and enchanting world of Pilate, his father's sister, he yearns

to be a part of her life, to soak up the knowledge he imagines she will share. But Macon does not want Milkman near Pilate, as he believes she is not good for his son:

Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too. Starting Monday, I'm going to teach you how. (55)

When Milkman agrees to go to work for his father, Macon is delighted because "his son belonged to him and not to Ruth" (63).

Ruth's identity, like Macon's, is also wrapped in wealth. Ruth's world as a child was one of prestige due to her father's position as a prominent physician. Her own identity was formed in a world full of the money and social standing achieved by the Doctor. In truth, Ruth's entire self-image is the one created by her relation to her father. When Macon confronts her one evening with the insulting claim that no one in town knows her as anyone besides "Dr. Foster's daughter," Ruth replies "That's so. I certainly am my daddy's daughter" (67).

After Milkman is born, Ruth does take some pleasure in her role as a mother. Nursing him well past an appropriate age, she imagines that she is "a cauldron issuing spinning gold" to her son" (13). Yet even this simple act of

motherhood is entangled with the memory of her father. Ruth realizes that "part of the pleasure it [feeding her son] gave her was the room in which she did it...It was just a little room that Doctor had called a study" (13). Her natural and familial identity as a mother cannot be separated from her role as the Doctor's daughter.

When she is caught nursing the toddler whose legs dangled "almost to the floor," and her son gets the nickname which will stick with him forever (13), Ruth's fantasies are shattered. No longer is she the mother, wife, or daughter she pretended to be once her nursing is discovered:

Ruth kept close to home and had no afternoon guests to keep from hearing that her son had been rechristened with a name he was never able to shake and that did nothing to improve either one's relationship with his father. (15)

Milkman's image of his mother is also destroyed when he remembers Ruth nursing him past infancy. Before this memory surfaced, he had thought her love for him was strictly maternal instinct. But this image is broken when he realizes how he has been used in a fantasy involving his maternal grandfather. Ruth's "confirmed, eternal love of him, love that he didn't even have to earn or deserve, seemed to him natural. And now it was decomposing" (77).

Suddenly Milkman's own identity as a loved son is in question. He understands that even his name was given to him as an insult to his mother and he did nothing to earn

the nickname himself. Instead, it was thrust upon him because of his mother's semi-incestuous act.

Yet Milkman's nickname does provide a clue to his past, however unpleasant, and Morrison develops the symbolic aspect of names throughout the novel to link her characters with their roots. Historically, the origins of African-American names go back only as far as the arrival of the first ancestor on American soil. Murray Heller writes:

Most Blacks were not named on ship or even after landing until they were purchased and transported to their owners...These blacks, then, had no real identity to Whites as human beings for they had no names. Only when the slave acquired a name did he assume some degree of dignity in the White owner's eyes, and it would seem that the type of names would reflect the relationship. (6)

Often, the names thrust on slaves were demeaning and given without much thought. Heller notes:

The attitude of the master toward the slave was less that of a parent toward his child than that of an owner toward his property. Probate records reveal a tendency to personalize and identify accurately by name all livestock, human or otherwise; mules and cows are often listed by name, and are distinguished from slaves mainly in terms of appraised value. To furnish an interesting comparison, 235 names of mules were

abstracted from Lowndes County, Mississippi, Probate Records for 1858. Of this number, 197, or 84 percent, occur also as slave names. (11)

This indiscriminate naming occurs in Song of Solomon as well, as the first Macon Dead is christened by a drunk white man who did not care about the black man's "real" name.

Despite their short history, names are extremely important to the people in Song of Solomon as they help establish identities. "Not Doctor Street" gets its name because the white politicians no longer want this particular thoroughfare called "Doctor Street," but the residents want its memory kept alive and refuse to call it the "real" new name, "Mains Avenue" (3-4). Similarly, Macon Dead's store was "declared to be Sonny's Shop," because "Scraping the previous owner's name off was hardly worth the trouble since he couldn't scrape it from anybody's mind" (17).

Although he gives up the idea of renaming his office, Macon longs for a personal name that has meaning, a name with serious historical significance:

Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No.



Nor his name. His own parents, in some mood of perverseness or resignation, had agreed to abide by a naming done to them by somebody who couldn't have cared less. (18)

Yet interestingly, Macon continues this "perverseness and resignation" when he names his own son Macon Dead. Macon Dead II's quest for his ancestral heritage and an identity for himself and his children play only a fleeting part in his thoughts. Macon is more concerned about his family's present-day appearance and with molding Milkman into a replica of himself than he is in his past.

Milkman, however, is much more interested in the original names of his family members. He wonders aloud about Hagar's last name and decides that Pilate, his aunt, might know the origins and true identities of the entire family. "Yeah. I'll ask Pilate. Pilate knows. It's in that dumb-ass box hanging from her ear. Her own name and everybody else's. Bet mine's in there too. I'm gonna ask her what my name is" (89).

Pilate does carry her own name in her ear. She saves the scrap of paper upon which it is scribbled by her father. While she does not know her own mother's name ("I'd know her ribbon color anywhere, but I don't know her name. After she died Papa wouldn't let anybody say it" (42)), she knows to protect her own. Later on, Milkman comes to the same realization:

Under the recorded names were other names, just as 'Macon Dead,' recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do. (333)

Both Pilate and Milkman understand that it is up to them to preserve their names--and the name of their family. The scrap of paper in Pilate's ear is significant, as it symbolically represents her identity. Yet it is also a link with her past. She literally "hangs on" to the name given to her by her father so it is noted down and remembered. Essentially, Pilate's earring is a piece of her ancestral heritage.

Milkman is aware that Pilate is the relative with the greatest knowledge of his family's past, and he uses the stories of her youth in his quest to find gold, and ultimately, himself. In many respects, she is a mother figure to Milkman as she is able to pass on the strength of family in a way that Macon Dead and Ruth cannot. Fiercely protective of her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar, Pilate is also attached to her nephew. Ruth tells Milkman, "Pilate was the one brought you here in the first place," and "she watched you like you were her own" (124-125).

Joanne Braxton writes that Pilate serves as the symbolic "outraged mother" in Song of Solomon:

The outraged mother embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, and personal courage-- values necessary to an endangered group. She employs reserves of spiritual strength, whether Christian or derived from African belief. Implied in all her actions and fueling her heroic ones is outrage at the abuse of her people and her person. She feels very keenly every wrong done her children, even to the furthest generations.

("Ancestral Presence" 301)

Pilate's courage and strength when her daughters are in danger, the sacrifices she makes for Hagar and for Milkman, her beliefs in the supernatural--all fulfill the definition of an "outraged mother" in African-American fiction.

This theme of Pilate as the dominant mother figure is emphasized by the story of her birth. Pilate tells Ruth "I don't remember my mother because she died before I was born" (141). Entering the world after her mother has taken her last breath, Pilate is mysteriously born without a navel. Lacking a physical mark to indicate a connection between her and a mother, Pilate becomes a symbolic Eve in the novel, and as such, she represents the mother of mankind.

As this "mother of all" in Song of Solomon, Pilate is also the symbolic ancestor. Believing that she is following

her father's orders by retrieving the bones of the dead man she and her brother left in a cave when children, she later learns that she is the caretaker of her father's remains instead. Thus Pilate is literally and figuratively a preserver of a piece of the Dead family's heritage. She is Milkman's link to his identity and the novel's link to African-American history.

Yet Pilate is not "all knowing," and Morrison emphasizes the need to know one's heritage by the mistakes Pilate makes because she is ignorant of some part of her ancestry. Pilate misinterprets the message of her father's ghost and, in an overwhelming irony, devotes her life to fulfilling his misunderstood commands. Because she does not know her mother's name (Sing), and because she does not know the story of Solomon, she cannot interpret her father's cries of "Sing, sing." Furthermore, when Pilate's father tells her "You just can't fly on off and leave a body" (209), she believes he is asking her to retrieve the body of a stranger, not knowing that her father is lamenting the loss of his own father.

This lack of ancestral knowledge hinder Pilate's attempts to know the truth about herself and her family. Yet Milkman is able to discover more about their heritage when he follows Pilate's clues and travels south. At first, "the past is a riddle, a reality locked in the verses of a children's song (the 'song of Solomon') whose meaning is no longer explicit because time has separated the words from

their historical context" (Willis, Specifying 95), yet by talking to people who knew his relatives, Milkman is able to uncover the clues that solve the mystery.

Pilate learns the history of her family after Milkman returns from his trip to Virginia and explains the true meaning of her father's words:

'Pilate! That's not what he meant. Pilate! He didn't mean that. He wasn't talking about the man in the cave. Pilate! He was talking about himself. His own father flew away. He was the 'body.' The body you shouldn't fly off and leave. Pilate! Pilate! Come here. Let me tell you what your father said. Pilate, he didn't even tell you to sing, Pilate. He was calling for his wife-- your mother.' (336-337)

Unfortunately, this truth comes late in Pilate's life and she dies before she can share it with her own children. Instead, it is up to Milkman to disseminate his new knowledge and tell his father and mother what he has learned of their ancestry:

There were long rambling talks with his father, who could not hear it enough--the 'boys' who remembered him in Danville; his mother's running off with his father; the story about his father and his grandfather. He wasn't a bit interested in the flying part, but he liked the story and the fact that places were names for his people. (338)

Macon Dead II enjoys the stories, but he cannot embrace them as part of his own identity. "No reconciliation took place between Pilate and Macon...and relations between Ruth and Macon were the same and would always be" (339). For Macon, it is too late for new knowledge of his past to affect his present.

Morrison discusses why the younger generation must be the group to pass on family histories in an interview published in the New York Times Magazine:

The fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children know who they are; they remember, half in glory and half in accusation. That is one of the points of 'Song': all the men have left someone, and it is the children who remember it, sing about it, mythologize it, make it a part of their family history. (50)

In Morrison's novel, it is Milkman who must continue to hum the "song of Solomon" and pass on the Dead family's legacy, and this knowledge of the past enables Milkman to stand up and confront Guitar at the end of the novel. He knows that as he "wheeled toward Guitar...it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother" (341), as he finally believes in himself. Milkman gains strength when he understands his heritage and grows from what he learns.

The theme of ancestral knowledge is further developed in Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel Beloved,

published in 1987. This work, like Song of Solomon, also explores the roles and histories of "forgotten" family members--prior generations with experiences and stories too painful to recall--and it examines the effect these painful memories have on individual identities and families.

However, while Song of Solomon explored a man's relationship with his parents and other relatives a generation removed from slavery, Morrison uses Beloved to focus specifically on the relationships between mothers and daughters who have been caught in the iron chains of oppression.

Morrison based Beloved on a 1855 incident when a runaway slave named Margaret Garner tried to kill her four children and spare them from the horrors of slavery. She was successful in killing one. According to other recorded historical events, matricide such as that committed by Garner was not altogether rare. As Paula Giddings notes, "Some slave women, perhaps a significant number, did not bear offspring for the system at all. They used contraceptives and abortives in an attempt to resist the system, and to gain control over their bodies" (46).

Deborah Gray White documents other incidents of matricide as well:

In 1830 a North Carolina slave woman was convicted of murdering her own child. A year later a Missouri slave was accused of poisoning and smothering her infant, and in 1834, Elizabeth, one

of James Polk's slaves, was said to have smothered her newborn. (88)

In an interview with Amanda Smith, Morrison explained that the story of Margaret Garner and other true-life tales "said something very special about black women." She felt that the successful protection of their children was the basic desire of women caught in slavery. "I was interested in the excesses of a violent system that would produce this all-encompassing effort to love something well." Margaret Garner, for example, loved her child enough to kill the very thing she was trying to save. What emerged in Morrison's work was a "fierce and heartrending evocation of the horrors of slavery and its complex and often devastating effects on the maternal instinct" (Smith 50).

Beloved tells the story of Sethe, a character modeled after Margaret Garner. Sethe is born into slavery but escapes to join her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, whose freedom has been bought by her son. When her owner finds her, Sethe chooses to kill her daughter so she will not be a slave. Years later, this daughter, whom Sethe calls Beloved, returns as a spirit and attempts to reunite with her mother.

Like Pilate, Sethe plays the role of the "outraged mother." Her protectiveness and courage act to the detriment of her own future, and, combined with her belief in the supernatural, cast her into the same mold as that filled by Pilate. Yet for Sethe, motherhood is an identity for which she must fight. In Song of Solomon, Pilate's role



as "mother of all" is not questioned, as the Dead family knows she is a good mother and a protector of her children. Yet for Sethe, the role of a "good mother" is perverted because of the horror of slavery. Christian notes that motherhood in slavery was "denied, devalued, obliterated by slavery since it was considered to be breeding" (18), and it is because of these obstacles that Sethe must earn the title of "mother" by protecting one of them with the ironic freedom provided by death.

Despite the new definitions of motherhood that Sethe must discover, parenting was a major component of Sethe's self-identity. Motherhood literally meant survival as she passed her genes on to a new generation. And spiritually, motherhood meant hope--a hope for an existence beyond the terrible tragedy of slavery.

Like Pilate, neither Baby Suggs nor Sethe remembers much about her own mother. Their names were long ago forgotten, if they were ever learned at all. Just as Pilate remembers only the blue ribbons in her mother's bonnet, Sethe remembers only the deformities imposed upon her mother by white men--the smile caused by the bit in her mother's mouth, the brand burned into her skin. And she remembers the pain of being deprived of her mother's milk:

Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what

it is to be without the milk that belongs to you;  
to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so  
little left. (Beloved 200)

In Song of Solomon, Milkman also knows little about his real mother. And although he received a great deal of his mother's milk as a child, it was not given to him with purely maternal motives. Ruth used Milkman; her extended nursing was for her own perverted pleasure and feelings of power. Milkman did not receive the mothering for which Sethe also yearns.

Ruth's use of Milkman causes her to question her own identity as a mother, daughter, and wife and Milkman's identity as a son. Similarly, Pilate's lack of a mother affects her own understanding of herself and others. In Beloved, slavery forces Sethe to redefine the traditional concepts of family as the absence of her own mother affects her role as daughter. Sethe must live without a connection to the past, without a mother, and she cannot call herself a daughter. When she speaks to Beloved after the girl returns to her as a spirit, Sethe says:

You came back like a good girl, like a daughter  
which is what I wanted to be and would have been  
if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice  
long enough before they hanged her and let me be  
one. (203)

Her mother's neglect influences Sethe's belief that,  
sometimes, mothers and daughters victimized by slavery must

do drastic things to prove their love and relationship to each other: Sethe must kill Beloved to be a loving mother, and Beloved must return from the dead to be a "good girl."

Because their own mothers were absent, the concept of motherhood is an extremely important component of Pilate, Baby Suggs and Sethe's self-definitions. Baby Suggs remarks "A man ain't nothin' but a man. But a son? Well now, that's somebody." (23) To her, the familial relationship is the more important one; just as a man is nothing compared to a son, Baby Suggs is also saying that a mere woman is nothing compared to a mother.

Both Pilate in Song of Solomon and Sethe in Beloved are determined to improve upon their experiences with their own mothers. Pilate is fiercely protective of both Reba and Hagar and will fight anyone who tries to harm them. When a suitor turns on Reba, Pilate confronts him with a knife and these words:

'You see, darlin, that there is the only child I got. The first baby I ever had, and if you could turn around and see my face, which of course you can't cause my hand might slip, you'd know she's also the last. Women are foolish, you know, and mamas are the most foolish of all. And you know how mamas are, don't you? You got a mama, ain't you? Sure you have, so you know what I'm talking about. Mamas get hurt and nervous when somebody don't like they children.' (Song of Solomon 94)

Sethe also wants to be there for her children, to help them escape from the grips of slavery. When Paul D. learns of the brutal attack upon Sethe by Schoolteacher's nephews, he is horrified that she is beaten while pregnant. Yet Sethe's concern is that the boys robbed her of a symbol of her motherhood--they stole her milk.

'They used cowhide on you?'

'And they took my milk.'

'They beat you and you was pregnant?'

'And they took my milk!' (Beloved 17)

Sethe becomes aware of her own power and role as the caretaker when the boys deprive her of this life-giving force. She becomes obsessed with getting milk to her daughter, Beloved, who has already escaped. She is determined to do what her mother could not.

The experience of slavery, Judith Thurman writes, was more damaging for Sethe than it was for Paul D. or the other Sweet Home men. If Paul D's hardships have been more extreme, she writes "they have also been less damaging to his pride. That pride has been invested in his own attributes: his strength, his mobility, his manhood, his ability to survive. Hers has been invested in her maternity and confused with her maternity" (175). The violation by Schoolteacher's nephews convolutes Sethe's definition of mothers and children. "I wouldn't draw breath without my children" (203), she says, believing that she has no role except as a mother who must protect her offspring.

During an interview after the 1855 incident, Margaret Garner said, "These are my children and I own their lives" (Smith 50). Sethe, too, makes this claim, yet it differs from the ways that Macon and Ruth Dead try to "own" Milkman. The Dead's motivations are strictly material; they each fight to have more than the other. Sethe, however, wants to own her children so she can protect them. This desire and her identity as mother become distorted and Sethe is willing to do anything she must to save them from being "dirtied" by the white people. "The best thing she was was her children. White might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing--the part of her that was clean" (251).

Sethe's act of killing Beloved is her attempt to rescue Beloved from a fate she considers to be worse than dying. It is Sethe's ultimate act of motherhood. "When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children" (200). Sethe does not want whites to control her children's destiny--she wants to choose how they live. Sethe wants to be a "good" mother.

Beloved's return is a symbolic reuniting of mother and daughter. It is, as D. Keith Mano notes, "a dreadful exaggeration of the mother-child relationship and an emblem for black racial memory" (54). As Sethe yearns for a connection with her own mother, Beloved wants to be

completely united with Sethe. She wants to be connected to her past. Christian writes "For (Beloved), her mother's face is her face and without her mother's face 'she has no face'" (18). The identity of the daughters depends upon an understanding of their mothers. These daughters, especially Sethe and Beloved, need to know why they were separated from the women who gave them life. In essence, the daughters need to remember why their mothers were forgotten in order to understand themselves.

Yet Beloved is more than a daughter. Beloved is the forgotten mothers as well, the victims of a brutality too painful to keep in one's memory. She symbolizes the mothers with forgotten names who did not survive the trip in the slave ships. Beloved is a ghost from Sethe's ancestral past, emerging from the water where she had been tossed overboard in a burial at sea. A dream-like sequence in her words contains Beloved's memories of the middle passage:

in the beginning the women are away from the men  
 and the men are away from the women    storms rock  
 us and mix the men into the women and the women  
 into the men    that is when I begin to be on the  
 back of the man    for a long time I see only his  
 neck and his wide shoulders above me    I am small  
 I love him because he has a song    when he turned  
 around to die I see the teeth he sang through  
 his singing was soft    his singing is of the place  
 where a woman takes flowers away from their leaves

and puts them in a round basket before the cloud  
 she is crouching near us but I do not see her  
 until he locks his eyes and dies on my face we  
 are that way there is no breath coming from his  
 mouth and the place where breath should be is  
 sweet smelling the others do not know he is dead  
 I know his song is gone now I love his pretty  
 little teeth instead (212)

Like the words in the "song of Solomon," Beloved's memories provide clues to her family's ancestral past. She remembers the "song" of the man on the slave ship, and symbolically, when he dies, his song is also gone until she remembers it and shares it with others.

Morrison further develops this idea of Beloved as an ancestor through the evolution of Sethe into the daughter and Beloved into the mother. "Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child," and "The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became" (251). Beloved's pregnancy can also be examined symbolically--she is the mother of everyone whose memories are too painful to recall.

This "rememory," or the knowledge of her ancestral heritage, helps Sethe understand herself. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (273), Paul D. tells her. For the first time, Sethe has the opportunity to understand who she is; a member of a family, including people who survived, and those who did not survive, the middle passage. Paul D.

wants Sethe to realize that she no longer has to view herself as an orphan who was forced to be a horrible mother who kills her children. He wants her to understand that she no longer has to live through her children and her hope for their futures. Paul D. wants Sethe to know, and like, herself.

Just as Milkman matures after he learns his heritage, Denver, Sethe's youngest daughter, grows the most as a result of knowing her ancestral past. Like Baby Suggs, Sethe and Beloved, Denver is also interested in learning about her roots. She wants to know where she came from and asks Sethe repeatedly to tell the story of her birth. The tale comforts Denver and makes her feel that she is connected to others.

Yet as a child, Denver experiences terrible loneliness. Sethe's act of killing Beloved has destroyed Denver's family, eliminating a sister and scattering two brothers. Like the violence and oppression of slavery, Sethe's aggression results in family members who are eventually forgotten. Denver takes refuge in a cave formed by five boxwood trees, a room of leaves. "In that bower, closed off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver's imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out" (28). The "live green walls" and the rooms of 124 Bluestone symbolically form a womb for Denver, a womb from which she does not emerge until she learns about and remembers her heritage--



the members of her "family" who were victims of the middle passage and the brutalized slaves represented by Beloved.

Baby Suggs assists Denver in her "re-birth." Knowing that she must get help for her mother and sister, Denver attempts to leave the porch of 124 but cannot, until suddenly:

Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. 'You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my.'

'But you said there was no defense.'

'There ain't.'

'Then what do I do?'

'Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.' (224)

With these words of encouragement, Denver breaks away from her sanctuary, the womb of 124.

Denver is the only woman in Beloved who has a mother who did not disappear. In fact, she has three mothers-- Sethe, Baby Suggs and Beloved. All three of these women in Denver's life help teach her about her ancestral past. "Denver knows what it is to see her mother in a terrible place, for she drinks her mother's milk with her sister's blood" (Christian 18). With Baby Suggs' advice to "Lay down

your sword" (224), Denver remembers her ancestors, the victims of slavery who did not survive. And through the form of Beloved, Denver is touched by all of her ancestral mothers. With the love and nurturing from all of these women, Denver finally "discovers" the people who have been with her all along, and she is able to form her own identity.

One of the final passages in the book, a conversation between Denver and Paul D., illustrates Denver's maturation:

'Uh, that girl. You know. Beloved?'

'Yes?'

'You think she sure 'nough your sister?'

Denver looked at her shoes. 'At times. At times I think she was--more.' She fiddled with her shirtwaist, rubbing a spot of something. Suddenly she leveled her eyes at his. 'But who would know better than you, Paul D? I mean, you sure 'nough knew her.'

He licked his lips. 'Well, if you want my opinion--'

'I don't,' she said. 'I have my own.'

'You grown,' he said.

'Yes, sir.'

'Well. Well, good luck with the job.'

"Thank you. And Paul D. you don't have to stay 'way, but be careful how you talk to my ma'am, hear?' (266)

Denver has grown up. She is a survivor of a middle passage, with knowledge of her past and hope for the future. But unlike Baby Suggs or Sethe, Denver has a mother she can protect--and a mother she will remember. Denver learns who she is by understanding and accepting her ancestral past. "She's mine, Beloved," Denver realizes. "She's mine" (209).

Beloved disappears after the rest of the women in the town have seen her. She forces these women to remember, if only for a moment, and is then quickly dispelled from the minds of the people who have seen and felt her. Like the anguish caused by slavery, Beloved is a symbol that is too horrible to recall. Even the name "Beloved" is not real and not remembered, as Sethe chooses this word for her daughter's tombstone only after she hears the preacher use the phrase "Dearly Beloved" at the funeral: Beloved is not her daughter's "real" name:

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? (274)

Morrison emphasizes that Beloved's tale "is not a story to pass on" (274), yet, despite the horrors, Morrison does exactly that. Through her craft, Morrison demands that her readers learn the stories of people who have been purposely forgotten, and she implies that there is hope for the future with a complete knowledge of the past. Like Milkman, Denver

grows when she learns her ancestry, and Morrison believes that others will grow with the same understanding.

Deborah Gray White notes: "History is supposed to give people a sense of identity, a feeling for who they were, who they are, and how far they have come. It should act as a springboard for the future" (167). In Song of Solomon and Beloved, Morrison demonstrates how African-American novels can provide a structure or "springboard" for future generations, as she helps replant the family trees toppled by the violent winds of history. The novels recreate the past and give hope for the future, but maybe most importantly, they provide the trunks and branches of old family trees that give contemporary African-Americans a place to carve their own names.

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## VITA

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