THE CONNELL SHORT GUIDE TO TONI MORRISON'S

Beloved

"These books are testament to the phrase 'Big things come in small packages'."
HELENA BONHAM CARTER

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Tessa Roynon

The
Connell Short Guide
to
Toni Morrison's

Beloved

by
Tessa Roynon

Contents

Introduction 1

What happens in *Beloved*? 3

How the story is told, and why 8

How should we judge Sethe's infanticide? 11

How does memory work in the novel? 14

What sources does Morrison draw on in her rewriting of the past? 18

How great is *Beloved*? 28

NOTES

Five facts about Toni Morrison and Beloved *20*
A short chronology 31
Further reading 32

Introduction

The climax of *Beloved* features a naked, pregnant ghost. What is it about this strange story, this book that is in so many ways so weird, that catapulted Toni Morrison to the fame and status she now enjoys? This novel is an exploration of American slavery and its aftermath, told from the point of the view of African Americans who were enslaved. Set in Kentucky (a slave state) and Ohio (a free state) in the mid-to-late 19th century, it gives voice to a black woman, Sethe, and to her daughters, Denver and Beloved. It allows those whom official "history" has silenced – those whom Morrison calls the "disremembered and unaccounted for" – to speak for themselves.

Beloved is many kinds of book at once: it is a ghost story, a gothic melodrama, a revenge tragedy and a trauma narrative. It is also a rewriting of history that meditates on the destructive power of violence, on the restorative power of love, and on the enduring power of memory both to damage and to heal. It is a book that tends to provoke strong reactions, and not everybody is a fan. As in other novels by Toni Morrison, its complex structure and innovative technique make great demands on the reader. Most people find that their efforts with its densely allusive language, with its resonances of numerous cultures and traditions, and with its haunting range of voices, are richly

repaid. Most people, that is, but not all.

In his *New Republic* review of November 1987 – one of the first responses to the novel – the African American writer and critic Stanley Crouch gave it a drubbing. Crouch finds Morrison guilty of revelling in black suffering and feminist martyrdom, and calls her work – and that of other African American women writers – "protest pulp fiction". He hates the way she writes: the lyrical style for which she is famous is "a purple haze of overstatement, of false voices, of strained homilies". The book is "clumsy", its diction is "counterfeit"; it is "trite" and "sentimental". Crouch takes particular issue with the book's dedication, which is to "Sixty Million and More".

Morrison says this is an estimate of all those enslaved and their descendants. But Crouch thinks she is competing in the suffering stakes with victims of the Nazi holocaust: "Sixty is ten times six... that is very important to remember. For *Beloved*, above all else, is a blackface holocaust novel." Paradoxically, Crouch's diatribe helps explain both the attention and the acclaim the novel has since enjoyed, as he offended nearly everybody.

Public opinion has for the most part sided with A.S. Byatt rather than with Stanley Crouch. Byatt's review – in The Guardian – appeared a month before Crouch's under the headline: "An American Masterpiece". Describing *Beloved* as "huge, generous, humane and gripping", she said it "gave

her nightmares" and yet left her "smiling with intense pleasure at the exact beauty of the singing prose". Byatt's fellow novelist, Margaret Atwood, was similarly laudatory, calling *Beloved* a "triumph" and a "hair-raiser". Awarded the Pullitzer Prize in 1988, its canonical status was soon assured, and, despite being made into an unsuccessful film ten years later starring Oprah Winfrey, it remains, on the page or memorably read by Morrison herself in the audiobook, a novel which most people find gets under their skin.

What happens in *Beloved*?

You have to work hard to find this out. Morrison makes us assemble the plot bit by bit, from piecemeal revelations that jump backwards and forwards in time. When the pieces are put together in sequential order, the story (told in three parts) goes like this: in 1873, Sethe is a formerly enslaved woman living in her mother-in-law's home, 124 Bluestone Road, on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio. There she works in a local restaurant and brings up her daughter, Denver, who is the only remaining child of the four that Sethe once had. Her two sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away from home some years previously when the house appeared to be haunted – a ghost was making its presence felt by moving and breaking things. Sethe

has not seen her husband, Halle, since their attempted escape from the Kentucky plantation, Sweet Home, had ended in disaster, and her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, had died shortly after the young boys fled home. Sethe begins a relationship with Paul D, another of her former fellow slaves, who has recently turned up unannounced at her home.

Shortly after this a beautifully dressed but curiously behaved young woman appears at the house. Unable to articulate her origins or her past except through the odd word or phrase, this woman, Beloved, becomes part of the household.

Neither Denver nor Sethe yet recognize Beloved as the returned long-dead little girl – Denver's sister and Sethe's daughter – whose throat Sethe herself had cut, on the point of recapture into slavery one month after her escape in 1855.

Denver soon senses that there is something strange, different and yet also strangely familiar about this character. She showers her in intense affection that springs from her own loneliness. Paul D, meanwhile, is disturbed by Beloved's ultimately successful attempts to seduce him. At the end of the first and longest of the novel's three parts, Paul D abandons the family on learning from Stamp Paid, an elderly local man who had helped Sethe (and countless others) to escape, of Sethe's notorious attack on her own child. Paul D is at this point unpersuaded by Sethe's explanation that she

perceived the death of her children to be preferable to their enslavement, that she "took and put [her] babies where they'd be safe". "You got two feet, Sethe, not four," he tells her, associating her act of infanticide with bestial savagery.

In Part II, the household at 124 Bluestone Road slowly descends into chaos. Sethe and Denver become increasingly attached to and possessive of Beloved. Following an ice-skating expedition which is joyful despite the characters' highly symbolic falls, Sethe treasures the "click" – the moment of recognition, precipitated by Beloved's singing a lullaby she herself had made up, that the newcomer is her returned, murdered daughter.

Beloved meanwhile becomes increasingly demanding of her mother's and sister's attention and resources: she eats their food and, apparently pregnant with Paul D's child, grows fatter as her family members start to waste away. Sethe loses her job and will not leave the house; Beloved appears insatiable and bent on her mother's destruction. Stamp Paid is disturbed to hear the "roaring" and "mumbling" of a whole array of spirits – of the "black and angry dead" that now possess the house. In the most experimental section of the novel, meanwhile, the three women in the household reveal their innermost thoughts and emotions through a series of overlapping monologues.

Part III, the novel's shortest section, consists primarily of the exorcism of Beloved. When Denver attempts to find a job in the house of a white family, she discloses her dire home situation and her mother's predicament to the family's servant, Janey. When Janey spreads the word in the community, the local women (who had previously ostracised Sethe because they were outraged at her audacious attack on her own child) now rally round her. As they approach the household, determined to get rid of the ghost, they sing. Sethe "tremble[s] like the baptized" in the "wash" of their sound, and Beloved disappears without trace. Following a conversation with the newly confident and independent Denver, Paul D returns to Bluestone Road with a revised understanding of Sethe's actions. Although she has now retired to her bed in sorrow and defeat, he urges her to aim for "some kind of tomorrow", and to move on from mourning the past, to value herself, and to recognise that she is her own "best thing".

Opposite: Kimberley Elise as Denver and Oprah Winfrey as Sethe in the 1998 film adaptation of Beloved

How the story is told, and why

In her 2005 foreword to *Beloved,* Morrison articulates her ambitious aims for the novel's mysterious opening paragraph:

> I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book's population.

Whether or not feeling "lost" at a book's opening can really equate to the alienation experienced by slaves, it is certainly true that every aspect of this novel's technique reflects its central themes. Most obviously, Morrison uses flashbacks to disrupt conventional chronology; in this way she explores the persistent presence of damaging past experiences. The other trademark of her style is her use of multiple narrative voices or points of view, often relating the same event in widely differing ways. These techniques reveal the influence of "high modernist" writers such as William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. It is no coincidence that Morrison focused on both these authors in her M.A. dissertation back in the early 1950s.

Through the text's repeated leaps backward (from the novel's present, in 1873) to the

characters' early experiences, Morrison emphasises the inescapable nature of memory – of memory as a force for both good and bad. In Part I, traumatic memories of the physical and sexual abuse that Sethe endured, for example, flood her mind in the middle of routine tasks such as washing and baking. It is through recollections of the past we learn characters' back stories: of Paul D's ordeal in the chain gang, and his destitute travelling all over the country; or of Denver's birth in the canoe, as she recounts it to Beloved. In this way we build up a picture of a community, a region, a nation and a history, even as we become intimately involved with just a handful of characters. While many of Sethe's memories threaten to drown her or to negate the possibility of future happiness, others, such as her near-perfect recall of the sermons that Baby Suggs used to preach in the Clearing, have sustained her through the years.

Morrison achieves several things through her use of multiple, conflicting points of view. In her essay 'Home', published in 1997, she describes her search for a new literary language that "could not, would not reproduce the master's voice and its assumptions of the all-knowing law of the white father". Her most striking use of multiple narratives and viewpoints is surely towards the end of Part I, when she relates Sethe's attack on her children. We have wondered from the novel's

start what exactly happened to the baby whose ghost has returned with such "venom" and "fury". We now learn about the events in the woodshed in three different ways.

First we encounter the perspective of the four white people – "schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher, and a sheriff" who are approaching the house with the intention of re-enslaving Sethe and her family. The actual moment of throat-cutting is missing from this account – it has already happened. Morrison then further defers revealing the truth by centring the next section of the narrative on Paul D and his disbelief about the newspaper account of Sethe's actions that Stamp Paid shows him. When Stamp wonders whether it can really be true that "a pretty little slavegirl... split to the woodshed to kill her children", Morrison refers to the novel's defining event for the first time.

The third account of what happened is from Sethe's point of view, told in free indirect discourse* in which we are privy to her thoughts and feelings. As she circles her kitchen trying to explain herself to Paul D, she also circles the truth with apparently irrelevant details about her past. These details enable the reader to sympathise with her perspective on her violent behaviour. This narrative is so compelling in its justification of

* Free indirect discourse (also referred to as free indirect speech or free indirect style) is a form of third person narration which gives access to a character's thoughts by taking on their speech, or merging it, with that of the narrative voice.