

**THE GHOSTLY PRESENCE: A JUSTIFICATION OF
SUPERNATURALISM IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED**

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Abstract

'A magnificent achievement...an American masterpiece' (A. S. Byatt). Beloved (1987), a novel by Toni Morrison, the first African American woman writer who won the Noble Prize for literature, in 1931. To expose the unique culture of America, the broad area of this paper analyzes the ghost story and realistic narrative. The study connects the real with supernatural by the characters, are haunted by the past. Yet in doing so, it also suggest about the revenge, parental guilt, the importance of family and unity. To conclude, the paper also gives a fine line exists between the spiritual world and the natural world, theme of remorse and redemption, presence of supernatural theme, Beloved, the character in spirit form, her presence make horror the novel. Ultimately, the paper argues the infanticide. The study concludes, with many illustrations of supernatural element of a ghost story.

Key words: Ghost, supernatural, mythical, horror, thrill, and realism.

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Introduction

Supernatural means anything that pertains to or is caused by something that can't be explained by the laws of nature. A story about ghosts, witches, and vampires in an interesting frame called supernatural. The events and the elements that are beyond what can be explained by nature. Supernatural elements are common and popular in contemporary American literature. In fact, Morrison uses the supernaturalism is a major element in the novel *Beloved*. In *Beloved*, Morrison wants to expose the unique culture of America, so that the ghost stories can look authentic and fascinating.

Beloved is based on real life story of Margret Garner. On Jan. 28, 1856, Garner killed her two-year old daughter and attempted to kill her other two children just because she didn't want to send her children for plantation where they worked as a slave and forget about their own identity. *Beloved* is such a unified novel that it's difficult to discuss it without giving away the plot, but it must be said that at the outset that it is, among other things, a ghost story, malicious and angry ghost, the spirit of Sethe's baby daughter.

Beloved, is the story of Sethe Sugg's struggles with the haunting memory of her slave past and the retribution of *Beloved*, the ghost of the infant daughter that she killed in order to save her from the living death of slavery. Indeed, the story itself involves a conflation of past, present and future in a single act, attempts to kill her children to

prevent them from being put into slavery. She succeeds in murder one of her four children, an 18-month-old 'the crawling already? Girl' (Beloved, 110).

Supernaturalism in Beloved

Beloved is not just the ghost of Sethe's dead child, she is a succubus, a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of semen. The succubus figure, which is related to the vampire, another sexualised figure drains a vital fluid, was incorporated into African American folklore in the form of shape shifting witches who 'ride' their terrified victims in the night, and Beloved, the ghost, embodies the qualities of that figure as well. In separate assaults, Beloved drains Paul D of semen and Sethe of vitality. As Pamela Barnett states this draining by the haunting and demonizing of many people's life in her book, *Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in Beloved*, 'Beloved is more than a ghost child, supernatural yet other what she describes as a menacing hybrid of European American and African spirit, sustaining itself through literally and metaphorically draining Sethe's vitality (Barnett , 41)'.

Sethe is the most drastically haunted in the book. She is the one who was beaten so badly that her back is permanently scarred. So, Sethe is the one whose past is so horrible that it is inescapable. How can a person escape the past when it is physically apart of them? Beloved, the ghost, 'made demands. Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give to her, Beloved invented desire' (Beloved, 240).

She enacts revenge on Sethe, by killing her like Sethe did to. Her style of killing is full of love, just as Sethe's have been. The daughter and mother are complete in this macabre circle. In the process to killing her mother, she would 'go to Sethe, run her finger over the woman's teeth while tears slid from her wide black eyes'(Beloved, 250). This incident has been stated in the form of statement by Victoria Glendenning in her article *Toni Morrison's Beloved* in Sunday Times that, 'Morrison melds horror and beauty in a story that will disturb the mind forever' (Glendenning 61).

Beyond the supernatural most people would reject to believe in, the true haunting that happen to people are very real. *Beloved* is such a novel. Critics of the supernatural will admire the way this twist is handled. Ms. Morrison blends the knowledge of folklore for instance in many traditions, the dead cannot return from the grave unless called, and it's passions of the living that keep them alive-with a highly original treatment. There is lot more too *Beloved*. In my view, Morrison creates a fine line between the spiritual world and the natural world, either worlds show up like oil and water, they never quite mix together. Morrison breaks these stereotypes by mixing her "supernatural and natural". As Henry Louis complete this mixing in his book *Race Writing and Difference* and articulates, 'a language that gives voice to the unspeakable horror of the black past' (Louis, 77).

Mythical and Magical creation of Supernaturalism

Pearl S. Bucks' *My Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life* are quite different to create an environment of supernatural. But Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* creates the invisibility as symbol of supernatural element, argues something about invisibility as he puts a line in the novel, 'I am invisible man...I am of substance, of flesh and done, fibre and liquids. And I might even be said to possess a mind I am invisible (Ellison 1979;7). Similarly, in the *Beloved* the almost mythical element of the story which has led many critics to focus on its supernaturalism should not obscure the realism at the heart of the novel. Invisibility, sometimes present in the novel as we see in the line "she is never dead her footprints come and go, come and go' (91) the marks left by the "unspeakable horror and terror" of ghost can never truly be removed. As we see in a review, *Toni Morrison's Beloved the Modern Gothic Novel* by Taylor Ramona in Sunday Times states that it can be argued:

Morrison uses many techniques derived from the gothic period to master her story of Sethe a former slave, haunted by the ghost of her murdered daughter, Beloved. Its

characters in situations seem completely interesting; give a past that is tragic, where mystical events happen. The modern gothic novel builds from a varied thematic past where story seemed romantic in flavour but also horrific and fantastic. One of the argument is that *Beloved* is a ghost story or “horror” novel (Ramona, 87).

The supernatural element is treated, not in an “Amityville Horror”, watch-me-make-your-flesh-creep mode, but with magnificent practically, like the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*. All the main characters believe in the ghost, so it’s merely natural for this one to be there, as Baby Suggs says, ‘we lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband spirit was to come bacjk in here? Or yours? Don’t talk to me. You lucky’. Elizabeth B. Houses argument, corrects the sentence of Baby Suggs that, ‘*Beloved* as a supernatural being...but...not simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery’ (*Beloved*, 52). *Beloved* remembers and recounts their horror in her book, *African American Woman in Literature*, ‘dead men lay on top of her...[s]he had nothing to eat. Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said *beloved* in the dark and bitch in the light’ (Houses, 241).

However, the gothic elements are complicated in Morrison’s novel, as the status of the ghost child is itself in question. This is no simple ghost story; even at the most basic level the ghost is ambivalent, open to various interpretations. This daring indifference to the rules of realistic fiction as Thomas R. Edwards in his book *The Gilded Age When America Was Boar* called it, ‘realistic function is the source of *Beloved*’s originality. In fact, *Beloved* can be and has been described as a ‘ghost story’ (Edwards).

The “thrills” of myth and magic are rooted in real “horror”. The “unreal” elements cannot end in the end, be said to be merely narrative devices, creating tension or suspense or drawing us further into magical, mythical and supernatural world because far from being led in to a world of fantasy and myth we face the horrifically real, the unspeakable reality. Morrison’s work might, she admits, fall into the realm of fiction called fantastic or

mythic or magical or unbelievable. *Beloved* has on its reconstruction of a reality that it no longer memory; it switches modes, alternating between realism and supernaturalism in order to fill the blanks of the past. Like Carl Plasa in her book *The Discourse of Slavery: From Aphra Ben to Toni Morrison* quoted it as, 'if *Beloved* is a story about ghost it is a story which itself has ghostly status or existence haunting...the gaps and silence of the tradition or which it draws seeking a release' (137) 'By the end of the novel, *Beloved* seems to disappear, and the townspeople forget her "like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep' (Plasa, 275)

Past becomes supernatural in present

These ghost, like *Beloved*, are a reminder that past can never really be past, that it cannot be escaped or ignored, because it always already living alongside the present, dismantling the authority of the word, interfering with the linear narrative of history.

Beloved, in the way of supernatural, returns from dead to disrupts Sethe's household and the community, refuses to allow the present to feel "at home" comfortable and reconciled with the past. This ghost/woman is a memory of lost futures, while, at the end of the novel, *Beloved* disappear without a trace, she "disappears", paradoxically, pregnant, carrying a future, like her own that will not have been. Morrison's paradoxically claim, 'sometimes good looks like evil and evil like good' (2). *Beloved*, the figure through, which the murmuring of these millions, who were dislocated, who lost their names, languages, families, traditions and lives are transmitted, is herself an impossible figure to represent; outing from an interview with Morrison, in Mervyn Rothstein in her newspaper article, *Toni Morrison in her new novel, defends women*. 'Morrison does take a stand on the horrible actions she depicts, but she indicates the blame against the horrific system of racial oppression which creates this ambiguity, a system so evil and terrible that ever murder can solution' (10).

In the Laugh of the Medusa (1981), Helen Cixous states that 'the new history is coming (Helen, 253).' And with Toni Morrison's *Beloved (1987)*, it begins to arrive. Yet, *Beloved* is a woman-centred narrative that challenges the "phallus of history". It is not 'her story' as a 'history' in the sense that central protagonist can be read as hysterics: subjects haunted by the past, characters who unconsciously expressed memories of psychic trauma through physical symptoms and use a corporeal discourse to articulate what is otherwise unspeakable. Herman Judith Butler describes the past in his book, 'Morrison breaks the glass of the past and recomposes it in disjointed and puzzling modern form. So that we 'struggle with its fragments and mysteries' often startled by flashed of our own reflection in them' (Herman, 197).

If the ghost can be read as shared hysterical symptoms, this implies that "rememory" must be a communal project for peace to be established. *Beloved's* presence pries the lid from Paul D's tobacco tin of memories, the tin "buried in his chest where a red heart used to be" (72-73). As he says, 'she reminds me of something. Something, look like, I'm supposed to remember' (234). Denver's trip to Lady Jones's house to ask for help when the situation at home becomes unbearable suggests that memory is vital for survival. Although she has not left 124 for more than a decade, she slowly remembers the way and begins a journey that will lead to salvation. Amy recognizes that the process of healing is painful—rubbing Sethe's feet, the white girl who helps to deliver Denver tells her, 'Anything dead coming back to life hurts,' and can't nothing heal without pain (35, 78)—but just as the table Paul D breaks during one of the ghost's tantrums is stronger after he mends it, the novel suggests that rebuilding the past can improve the present:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no, it's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade

of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there____you who never was there____if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again...'denver picked at her fingernails. 'if it's still there, waiting. That must mean that nothing ever dies.' Sethe looked right in Denver's face. 'Nothing ever does,' she said' (36).

Sethe constantly recalls her past, as if by doing so, she would be able to free herself from its horrors. The past constantly haunts her, the sweet home comes back whether she wanted it or not. We noted that, *Beloved*, is a novel 'about traumas and healing powers of memory, or rememorize as Sethe calls it, adding a connotation of cyclical recurrence.

At the end, this impetus is best expressed, in a passage that can almost act as a commentary on the novel which would be published nearly eighty five years later. In her last moments, *Beloved* stands as a contradictory image, both as the African ancestor, the beautiful African mother, connecting the mothers and daughters of African descent to their pre-slavery heritage and power, and as the all-consuming devil child as Du Bois defines this past with editing by Linda Kumhalz "From African American Review, 'Morrison resurrects the devil child then spiteful, beautiful, painful past, so that *Beloved* and the novel will live on to haunt us' (Linda Kumhalz).

What Morrison does in *Beloved* is to remember, in order to revive, to survive, to rename, to re-possess. At the end of *The Color Purple* Alice Walker, signing herself as author and medium writes, 'I thank everybody in this book for coming (Walker, 262).' Just like Walker, Morrison in a true sense, America's most renowned black women writer sum up by epigraphic line 'This is not a story to pass on (*Beloved*, 275).'

Conclusion

The ghostly presence of *Beloved*, in Sethe's life is justified to us because Morrison creates the setting for projected supernaturalism as a result of the troubled psychic state of the person. Sethe's frustration for having killed her child, justifies the creation of an

imaginary world and characters. Morrison connects the real with the supernatural by connecting the world of the living and the dead through Sethe and Beloved. The most obvious instance of Beloved's supernatural is seen in the fact, that while it remains firmly rooted in the truth of its story, it is, at the same time, drawing on the unreal, the magical, the mythical, ultimately, the supernatural.

To conclude, it must be examined that Morrison provides a transition between the two worlds. First, she introduces Beloved the ghost as just that ghost...a ghost obviously still part of the spiritual worlds. She then weaves this spiritual part into the real world by manifesting Beloved into a seemingly live person. She affirms the old standards by implying that while the two worlds appear to be meshed perfectly on the surface, deep down they are in total chaos as feminism in Morrison's novels is grounded upon like the structure of a culture...which defines women, as worthless and invisible victims.

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