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PIGEONHOLING WITHOUT HYBRIDIZING:  
THE FALSE REDUCTION OF TONI MORRISON'S *BELLOVED*

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Bachelor of Arts in English

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August, 2002

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

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at the

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This thesis has been approved  
For the Department of ENGLISH  
And the College of Graduate Studies by

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Department & Date

Dedicated to my parents for their constant support;  
Like Randy Pausch, I also won the parent lottery.

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PIGEONHOLING WITHOUT HYBRIDIZING:  
THE FALSE REDUCTION OF TONI MORRISON'S *BELLOVED*

LAUREN B. MOLNAR

ABSTRACT

While Morrison's *Beloved* uses apparitions as symbolic association for slavery, the totality of what the incarnation of Beloved represents has been minimized by critics. Various genres are circulating in *Beloved*: magical realism, the historical novel, the gothic novel, and the ghost story. However, potential problems arise when attempting to pigeonhole the novel into simply one genre; this is too limiting and nullifies a critic's insight by disregarding other possible dimensions within the text. *Beloved* moves through genres as it progresses and more attention needs to be paid to this shift. The narrative begins as a ghost story, but switches genres once the ghost incarnates; this pushes the text into magical realism, while still based on a historic episode. An eradication of the possible dimensions of the text diminishes the novel to a false reduction. A comingling and hybridizing of genre evolution is essential, otherwise ownership of the novel is lost.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Furniture flying across the room; the ghost of a baby crawling up the stairs; a red undulating light engulfing the doorway: this sounds like a ghost story, but is actually Morrison's *Beloved*. An apparent supernatural presence at the house on Bluestone Road that is viewed as normal and comforting; a fully embodied apparition which uncannily resembles a deceased member of the family; a comingling of a rational view of a world residing in a prosaic society which exists outside the bounds of reality: this sounds like a magical realist novel, but is actually Morrison's *Beloved*. An atmosphere of mystery and suspense which provides a threatening fear enhanced by the unknown; supernatural events which could be perceived as omens; a highly sentimental narration often overcome by anger and sorrow; a woman in distress: this sounds like a gothic novel, but is actually Morrison's *Beloved*. A distraught mother of four slitting her own child's throat in a desperate attempt to prevent her daughter from being recaptured and entering an austere life of slavery: this sounds reminiscent of the historical plight of Margaret Garner, but is actually Morrison's *Beloved*. Given these various genre prospects and their arguable applications appearing within her text, Morrison has left the door open for a variety of interpretations. Critics have taken different approaches when it comes to categorizing

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*; is it a ghost story, a magical realist novel, a gothic novel, or a historical novel? The urgent need for critics to classify the novel has little to do with where one would locate the text on a shelf and more to do with Morrison's organization of her novel that moves through genres as it progresses; it is my argument that critics need to focus more on this shift.

Many critics, such as Walter Clemons and Linda Krumholz<sup>1</sup> have argued that Morrison's novel follows the historical trope; Morrison, herself, has stated that her novel is loosely based on the plight of Margaret Garner. However, it is not only the incorporation of Garner's story, but the innumerable references to slavery which only further support this argument. Moreover, the many references to the Middle Passage provide the text with a historical feel while bordering on a perceptible crossover into the neo-slave narrative genre<sup>2</sup>. However, if Morrison's text is purely historical, how do critics explain the palpable incorporation of spirits? Doesn't the haunting by the spirit of 124 Bluestone Road push the once historical novel into the realm of a ghost story? Peter Ramos believes so in his critical essay<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, once the spirit incarnates and *Beloved* appears, isn't that ghost story now pushing into the realm of magical realism? Critics such as Brenda Cooper, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Stephen M. Hart, and Lindsay Moore believe so and have all contributed to the focus of magical realism in Morrison's *Beloved*. Although, aren't these supernatural events combined with Sethe's distress,

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard W. Bell, Stanley Crouch, Ann Snitow, and Steven Weisenburger have also focused on the historical tropes in their critiques.

<sup>2</sup>For argument purposes, I will combine the neo-slave narrative genre with that of the historical given the intertwining of genres both deeply rooted in history.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas R. Edwards also shares the ghost story genre classification.

anger, sorrow, and sentimental narration now pushing the once magically real novel into the realm of the gothic genre? Critic Cedric Gael Bryant<sup>4</sup> has honed in on this possibility in his article examining Morrison's text as that of a gothic novel. Many of the aforementioned critics appear to be bordering on a comingling and hybridizing of genres in their critiques of Morrison's *Beloved*; however, it is unclear whether this much needed hybridization is intentional or purely coincidental. I will argue toward the former. This comingling and hybridization is essential; the genre mutation as the text evolves is undeniable. If this evolution is overlooked in Morrison's *Beloved*, the whole ownership of the novel is lost.

Throughout this paper, I will explore the various genres that are circulating in Morrison's novel: magical realism, the historical novel, the gothic novel, and the ghost story. I will argue that on a surface level it cannot be denied that Morrison does use apparitions as symbolic association for slavery throughout her text. However, the totality of what *Beloved* represents in regards to the correlation of the ghost of Beloved and its relationship to slavery has been minimized by critics. I will use this novel not only to focus on the many facets of magical realism that are exhibited throughout Morrison's text, particularly the ghost as the incarnation of Beloved, but also to connect these applications of magical realism to its larger influence—slavery. I will assert the unmistakable correlation between slavery and the incarnation of Beloved that the aforementioned critics have minimized. I will prove that not only is magical realism too limiting a term when it comes to classifying *Beloved*, but consequently so are all of the

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<sup>4</sup> Critics Margaret Atwood and Kim Hyejin have also focused on the gothic interpretation of *Beloved* as well.

other genres. There are various potential problems that arise when attempting to classify Morrison's novel into simply one genre. Not only do many of the once clear cut ideologies of the explicit genres begin to fade into one another, but furthermore, the magical realism sections of Morrison's text begin to assimilate with ghost story elements which begin to evolve into the elements of a gothic novel; now three genres have hybridized into one. Because of the variety of feasible ways to interpret Morrison's text it becomes clear that one classification is not enough. If a text fits the mold of multiple genres, then the genre classification has to evolve. It cannot simply be the genre classification which holds the most water; the acknowledgment of other dimensions now prohibits this possibility. An emphasis is placed on genre classification in order to fully understand all of the possible dimensions of Morrison's text. The acknowledgment of a specific genre classification, as well as the ignorance of others which are applicable, nullify a critic's ostensibly compelling insight. In an attempt to pigeonhole Morrison's novel into one genre, critics are eradicating all of the possible dimensions of the text while diminishing the novel to a false reduction. The genre transformation that takes place in Morrison's text is well thought out and essential to understanding the dynamics within the pages. The narrative begins as a ghost story, but switches genres once the ghost incarnates; this pushes the text into magical realism, while it is still based on a historic episode. I will address the effects these many genres have on the reader, as well as the potential payoff of Morrison's writing methodology as my paper progresses. However, first it is essential to understand all of the aforementioned genres and what each entails.

CHAPTER II  
*BELOVED AS A GHOST STORY*

Morrison's *Beloved* is set in the year 1873<sup>5</sup>, in a small town near Cincinnati, Ohio. Sethe, the mother, has escaped slavery from the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky and along the way has given birth to Denver. Morrison states early on that Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—"as soon as merely looking in the mirror shattered it (the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny handprints appeared in the cake<sup>6</sup> (the signal for Howard)" (3). Both the shattering mirror and tiny handprints push the text into the realm of a ghost story. In order for a text to initially be viewed as a ghost story, it needs to possess one major key element: a ghost. This ghost possesses the power to immobilize and terrorize an audience while tapping into the feelings of a primitive fear by somehow intensifying them. *Beloved* depicts a family not only torn apart by slavery, but the mysterious occurrences that routinely ensue in the house at 124 Bluestone Road. Morrison has the astounding ability

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Morrison's novel was set in the year 1873. The story of *Beloved*'s gruesome murder is told through flashbacks. The incarnation of *Beloved* first appears eighteen years after her death in 1855. *Beloved*'s incarnation appears at the age she would have been, had she not been murdered.

<sup>6</sup> This opinion is disputed by Denver in her stream of consciousness monologue.

to illustrate the intense haunting of the house<sup>7</sup>, while at the same time depict a composed Sethe in response to the condition. When Paul D Garner, a fellow slave from Sweet Home, turns up at 124 Bluestone Road, our first indication that something is wrong with the house is when Paul D attempts to cross the threshold:

Paul D tied his shoes together, hung them over his shoulder and followed her through the door into the pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood.  
“You got company?” he whispered, frowning.  
“Off and on,” said Sethe.  
“Good God.” He backed out of the door onto the porch. “What kind of evil you got in here?”  
“It’s not evil, just sad. Come on. Just step through” (Morrison 10).

Sethe’s acknowledgment, moreover, redirection of the thought of the red light being “evil” that Paul D alludes to, is her way of not only diminishing the severity of, but defending the light by telling Paul D that it is “not evil, just sad” (10). This is an example of one of Morrison’s allegorical uses: the use of personification. Sethe defends the light as if she would defend a person. The second line of the text states that 124 was “full of a baby’s venom” (3). Arguably, Sethe is defending her daughter’s honor. Morrison’s portrayal of Sethe’s initial response toward Paul D acknowledges Sethe’s reverence for the “ghost,” while at the same time demonstrates that the occurrence is apparently outside of the natural realm of reality, at least for Paul D since he vocalizes his concern and displays a noticeable discomfort. The ghost story genre is based on imagination rather than fact (Britannica); this is where an obvious confusion begins to erupt. Peter Ramos hints at this potential perplexity in his 2008 article, “Beyond Silence and Realism:

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<sup>7</sup> The incarnation of Beloved has not yet materialized as a menacing trepidation for the family at this point in the novel.

Trauma and the Function of Ghosts in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Beloved*,” but focuses on the spirit of *Beloved*, rather than incorporating the apparition into his argument.

Ramos views *Beloved* as a ghost story, one in which Morrison uses a ghost as a literary device. However, he focuses on the ghost representing the important element of “distance” from some unspeakable event and from other characters in the novel (50). The use of the simple word “distance” undermines his entire critical analysis on many different levels. First of all, the unspeakable event aforementioned alludes to a historical event, slavery, which would clearly place *Beloved* into a historical genre<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, Ramos believes the ghost/spirit represents distance. That argument would be convincing if the ghost remained a spirit throughout the entire context of the novel; a ghost or spirit could be justified and ignored, just as the acknowledgement of slavery is often ignored. Not as an act of ignorance, but as a painful memory that people want to forget. When Morrison manifests the spirit, she forces the readers and characters within the text to address the situation. A fully embodied human being cannot be ignored, overlooked, or explained away; it has to be acknowledged. How does Morrison’s methodology for bridging the gap establish a “distance” from history that Ramos claims exists? Furthermore, one could argue that the “ghost” depicted in the text does not hold the key characteristics essential to the ghost story genre. Clearly, *Beloved* does not fit into this category verbatim. However, it could be argued that *Beloved* does possess enough of these characteristics to be classified as a ghost story: the haunting spirit is referred to as the deceased baby; there are tiny handprints appearing in a cake; a mirror does shatter; Denver does hear the baby ghost crawling up the stairs; furniture does mysteriously fly

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<sup>8</sup> Ramos even mentions Margaret Garner in his article.

across the room; there is a red, undulating light engulfing the doorway. However, there are two noticeable anomalies. First, the spirit does not terrify the women; they appear to find comfort in the presence. This is clearly depicted when Paul D arrives, states his uneasiness, and Sethe quickly diminishes his dramatics. Secondly, once the spirit incarnates into a full blown apparition, the ghost story genre ends and the magical realism genre begins.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE HISTORY OF MAGICAL REALISM

Since the 1940's, literary critics have utilized the term "magical realism" as a label to define a certain style of Latin American fiction in which folklore plays an integral part. Many critics have begun to shift their focus, however, from applying magical realism to Latin American narrated works, to applying it to texts of African-American context, specifically focusing on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. By applying magical realism to a different culture's text, changes have evolved in the working definition of the term magical realism itself. I will write a brief history of the evolution of the term magical realism, as well as how the changing of the term magical realism has influenced the use and application of the term to Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*.

Magical realism is a term often used by critics to describe a mingling of the mundane with the fantastic (Mullan 2). A brief history of the term is required in order to better comprehend why the term is complex. In 1925, Franz Roh, a German art critic, used the term to describe an emerging post-expressionist form. The art that is described as magical realism was "realist," but simultaneously possessed a strange or dreamlike quality. Essentially, the "magic" was derived from the painting technique employed by the artists associated with the movement, rather than the actual content they produced

(Mullan 1). In 1955, Angel Flores modified “magic realism” into magical realism by applying the term to Latin American writing. Magic realism was distinguished by the fact that its practitioners treated the “fantastic” as “normal,” without any sense of surprise or amazement (Mullan 1). Folklore is considered an integral part of the genre, but if an author strictly adheres to this definition is it easy for “magical realism” to morph into “fantastic literature.” The International Association for the Fantastic Arts uses the term “fantastic” to cover fantasy and science fiction, as well as fairy tales, romance, myth, legend, ghost stories, and horror. Within these areas are sub-genres that can go on almost indefinitely; mystery, science fiction, time travel, romance, fantasy, horror, ghostly fairy tales and combinations that may never have been written, but that are undoubtedly percolating in someone’s inner thoughts. *Beloved* does not appear to fit into the genre of a fairy tale or science fiction novel: the novel incorporates numerous facets of magical realism. Anglo-American critics have provided the definition most commonly associated with the term magical realism: it is a mixture of the quotidian and the fantastic, both in terms of content and technique (Mullan 1). David Mullan claims “to describe a work of fiction as ‘magic realist’ is to impose a system of order on a subjugated social system. The problem here is that anything that seems uncanny or unfamiliar to Western eyes becomes ‘magic,’ while to a native of that culture the events or ways of thinking so described are ‘real’” (2).

In Magical Realism in West African Literature (1998), Brenda Cooper claims that magical realism is a literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre and aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites (24). Magical realism challenges polar opposites such as life and death and differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a

normal, modern world with the authentic descriptions of humans and society. Two conflicting perspectives characterize “magical realism”; one is based on a “rational” view of reality, while the other is based upon the acceptance of the supernatural as a “prosaic reality” (22). The two conflicting perspectives incorporate two divergent views of reality. The “rational” view of reality pertains to the “real world,” as most of society knows it today: occurrences that one tends to view as “normal” or mundane. A “prosaic reality” is one in which ordinary, literal views of the world are influenced by supernatural incidences. However, these supernatural influences are not perceived as supernatural at all, but rather the norm in a prosaic reality. When a great deal of focus is placed on the term, “supernatural occurrence,” the focus tends to shift from what is actually occurring in the present moment toward what psychological reactions manifest in the people experiencing them; thus, the experience now tends to be associated, and almost tainted with negativity and fear rather than mere acknowledgment and acceptance. Whereas a rational view of reality would deem apparitions as magical, a prosaic reality would deem the appearances of apparitions as the norm; this is the case in Morrison’s *Beloved*.

CHAPTER IV  
THE APPLICATION OF MAGICAL REALISM TO *BELOVED*

Morrison seamlessly creates a calm fluidity in her characters' acknowledgements of the ghostly presence that rather than creates fear, calmly dissipates the notion before it even has a chance to manifest in the reader's subconscious. Hence, Morrison successfully creates a prosaic reality which allows readers to quickly and fully submerge themselves in the text, rather than waste time questioning and struggling with accepting the notion of a supernatural existence in general. This allows the reader a glimpse into the characters' present, as well as their past; it is through these glimpses that the reader also acquires a deeper sense of American History. It becomes apparent that the dehumanizing effect of slavery is not only prevalent in Morrison's characters' past, but in everyone's past, no matter what the color of one's skin may be.

In "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call" (1992), P. Gabrielle Foreman argues that magical realism is relevant in examining African American fiction. Foreman's article focuses on Toni Morrison's and Isabel Allende's interrelation of history, ontology, and the magically real and how both conceive "women as the site of and link between these categories" (370). In his article,

Foreman focuses on the strength of African American women. Foreman also claims that magical realism presumes that the individual requires a “bond with the traditions and faith of the community, that she is historically constructed and connected” (370).

Foreman believes that memory is grounded in “recuperated relation to the historical,” but uses this claim to focus on “the sight of history that survives, and so nurtures the present” (375). This notion coincides with my argument regarding Morrison’s text; however, the “history” that Foreman is referencing in his article is not in relation to slavery, but rather the strength of Morrison’s ability to pull readers into her reality which is solidly rooted in the world of African American cultural traditions. Therefore, an apparent piece is missing from Foreman’s work: the connection between African American roots and slavery.

Throughout Morrison’s *Beloved*, the repeated occurrences of the appearance of the incarnation of Beloved are of paramount importance. Beloved is not an apparition that materializes from excitement and suspense, but rather haunts the family, not in an eerie, menacing way, but as a daunting reminder of the atrocity of slavery that rather than permeates American history, appears to have subsided in individuals’ memories. Morrison brings this atrocity to the forefront by manifesting Beloved; when the spirit manifests, the apparition of Beloved forces the readers and characters within the text to directly address her, or more generally, the atrocity she represents. A fully embodied human being cannot be ignored, overlooked, or explained away; it has to be acknowledged. Even after Beloved’s manifestation disappears, Sethe remembers her existence. Beloved is not an apparition that evaporates into thin air, leaving no sign of subsistence in her wake. Through symbolic association, Beloved encapsulates the very foundation in which slavery is deeply rooted: undeniable hatred, anger, guilt, alienation,

as well as the ingrained remembrance of a haunting suffering that will never disappear, no matter how much time elapses.

Building off of Foreman's connection between African Americans and their deeply rooted history, Stephen M. Hart's 2003 article, "Magical Realism in the Americas: Politicised Ghosts in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The House of Spirits*, and *Beloved*," is the first article of its kind to make a connection between Morrison's ghost allegory and its influences stemming from slavery. As aforementioned, Foreman does not make this correlation. Morrison, herself, makes that association clear in her foreword to *Beloved*:

The heroine would represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom. The terrain, slavery, was formidable and pathless. To invite readers (and myself) into the repellant landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts (Morrison XVII).

This statement alone seems to coincide with the gothic, historical, ghost story, and magically real tropes. Hart demonstrates that Morrison's *Beloved* presents the supernatural in a way that is a "subalternised reality that is expressive of societal oppression" experienced by African Americans in the nineteenth-century United States society (121). Hart claims that there are a number of ways that Morrison's *Beloved* incorporates aspects of magical realism; "There are portrayals of ghosts in a mundane context; the use of ghosts to allude to a subalternised supernatural; and the use of supernatural as a means of drawing attention to the ideological rifts within a given society, that is, highlighting the fact that what exists for one group does not exist for another" (120-21). While all of Hart's aspects incorporate magical realism into Morrison's text, Hart falls short in utilizing his proclamation of a "subalternised reality that is expressive of societal oppression" (121) by failing to not only elaborate his

statement, but also make a connection to *Beloved* as an incarnation that is heavily influenced by the bonds of slavery.

Hart also claims that ghosts “rupture the socio-spatio-temporal membrane of society, and in ‘magic-realist fiction,’ operate as a trace of subaltern trauma:” hence, “politicised ghosts” (118). Hart claims:

The novel [*Beloved*], as we see it, is constructing a web of associations between the unconscious, the socially repressed, women within patriarchal society, and last but not least, the ghost of what Baby Suggs calls ‘some dead Negro’s grief.’ The supernatural expressed in *Beloved* is, thus, an ethnicised, subalternised world, which points to the enormous chasm between white and black worlds. Racism is predicated on the desire to keep Negro ghosts in the no-man’s land of death. The novel is careful to note that the tragedy of *Beloved*’s murder is the direct result of the inhumane treatment that Sethe received when she was living at Sweet Home in Kentucky, something she did not want her children to experience, preferring to kill them than allow them to be captured by the slave catcher and taken back (121-122).

Hart argues that the horror of the novel has cultural roots and incorporates Heinze’s argument that *Beloved* represents “not only the spirit of Sethe’s daughter; she is also the projection of the repressed collective memory of a violated people” (121). This statement coincides with my argument. However, upon completion of this line, Hart immediately concludes the thought there and shifts direction. Hart goes on to prolong the article by focusing on the “remarkable use of language” in Morrison’s text and references Morrison’s temperament in her Nobel acceptance speech (122). The progression is ambiguous and indecisive. Like Foreman’s, Hart’s article also minimizes the central reality the novel insists on: magical realism and what I assert is the unmistakable correlation between slavery and the incarnation of *Beloved*. Nevertheless, *Beloved* seems to incarnate much more as the text continues. Furthermore, the techniques of magical realism are essential to Morrison’s conveyance of this reality.

Beloved appears to become less magical as the text proceeds; Beloved is initially viewed as a supernatural incarnation upon her arrival. However, the more her apparition is present in the physical realm, the more her mannerisms, behavior, and actions are perceived as humanlike and the supernatural aspect appears to regress in both magnitude and consideration. This is achieved by means of Beloved's past memories/re-memories: Sethe's "diamond" earrings as well as the lullaby that she requests that Sethe sing to her, which Sethe created solely for her children. This takes the reader into a mytho-historical situation: one in which Beloved becomes more incarnate and less ghostly than before because she develops and encompasses more humanlike qualities in the form of memories and an apparently prior embedded existence in the physical realm.

The magical realism that Morrison applies to her text through the haunting of the house at 124 Bluestone Road and the apparition of Beloved are the most influential aspects in the novel in the sense that these "supernatural" occurrences make the text that of a magical realist novel, while at the same time incorporate the demise of slavery into the novel through the incarnation of Beloved. The reason Sethe slits the throat of her two-year-old daughter is to prevent her from living her life as a slave. Granted, it is an astonishing deed, but Sethe makes the ultimate sacrifice for her daughter; she gives up her own happiness (she will acquire much guilt from the murdering of her own child), but has faith that she is inevitably acknowledging her daughter's wishes by preventing her from leading a life bonded in the chains of slavery. The reason Sethe kills Beloved is deeply rooted in the horrific impact of slavery and to overlook this would be a fallacy. Sethe was repeatedly whipped and tortured while in the chains of slavery. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that this was considered the norm and happened to slave men



and women alike. Even her milk that her body created to provide for her own child was stolen from her, just as her own child was stolen from her by the unimaginable deed that she was forced to commit because of slavery.

The magical realism depicted early on in the novel will now be examined by incorporating Lindsay Moore's concise key characteristics. According to Moore's 1998 magical realism overview, there are four key characteristics of magical realism: hybridity, irony regarding author's perspective, authorial reticence, and supernatural/natural (n. pag.); these characteristics will be applied to Morrison's *Beloved*. Hybridity deals with the incorporation of the illustration of change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more dense and true "reality" than conventional realist techniques would illustrate. A "more dense and true reality" would immediately submerge the reader in a place and time where emotions were intense, futures were uncertain, and the reality of the time and place were by no means sugar coated. When applying Moore's hybridity characteristic to Morrison's text, the depiction of a dense and true reality is one in which the incarnation of Beloved, the component routinely used throughout the novel, seizes the opportunity to parallel her haunting of the family to the likeness of slavery. This will be argued in greater depth later in the article.

The irony regarding author's perspective insinuates that the author must have ironic distance from the magical worldview for the realism not to be compromised. This can be accomplished by simply addressing and acknowledging the tension depicted in a scene without the author interjecting personal thoughts, viewpoints, or interpretations. The respect that both Sethe and Paul D exhibit toward the "haunting" encompasses the

irony regarding author's perspective that Moore is referencing. The writer must also strongly respect the magic; otherwise, the magic dissolves into simple folk belief or complete fantasy, split from the real instead of synchronized with it. The term "magic" relates to the fact that the point of view that the text depicts explicitly is not adapted accordingly to the implied worldview of the author. Just as the irony regarding author's perspective connects Paul D and Sethe with the haunting of the house, Morrison's authorial reticence encourages credibility and offers validity to the text and its readers by not focusing on explaining the "red, undulating light"; therefore, preventing it from being seen as awkward and outside the realm of normalcy.

Authorial reticence refers to the lack of clear opinions about the events and the credibility of the worldviews expressed by the characters in the text. This technique promotes acceptance of magical realism. The simple act of explaining the supernatural world eradicates its position of equality regarding a person's conventional view of reality. Because it would then be less valid, the supernatural world would be discarded as false testimony. At no time throughout her novel does Morrison claim that the incarnation of Beloved is a hoax, nor is her origin discussed by the characters. Morrison depicts Beloved's manifestation in tangible terms. She doesn't outright vocalize the arrival of Beloved as the incarnation of Sethe's two-year-old daughter, whom she murdered eighteen years prior; however, she most certainly alludes to that fact through details and coincidences that both the incarnation and the child shared: specifically the "diamond" earrings which Beloved "saw" and the lullaby Beloved knows that Sethe manufactured to sing to her children. Furthermore, Morrison does not specifically reference Beloved as a supernatural being to her readers either. Instead, Morrison constructs an assemblage of

women outside of the home, not to behold the incarnation, but rather to absolve the home of the incarnation—illustrating the actuality, rather than the inquiry, of the spirit. These women acknowledge the spirit's existence and its demise, rather than question its existence in the first place. Is this because an implication of a supernatural being would eradicate its position of equality regarding a person's conventional view of reality and readers would deem the supernatural as fictitious? In order for readers to feel kidnapped and thrust into a ruthless world where they are truly sharing the experience (Morrison XVIII), it is essential that everything about those circumstances, characters, and society appear realistic. In an attempt to establish this realism, Morrison incorporates a firm historical foundation for her text utilizing Margaret Garner's plight of 1856.

Moore's key characteristic of magical realism: hybridity, irony regarding author's perspective, authorial reticence, and the supernatural/natural are collectively incorporated in the course of Morrison's depiction of the incarnation. When dealing with the supernatural/natural, the reader realizes that the rational and irrational are opposite and conflicting polarities, but that they are not disconcerted; the supernatural is integrated within the norms of the perception of the narrator and characters in the fictional world. Moore does have valid incorporations of textual evidence to support her hypothesis. However, it is important to note that Moore has also created a false reduction among her four key characteristics; upon further inspection and application it becomes evident that these "magical realism" characteristics also align in a plethora of ways with all of the other aforementioned tropes once the spirit materializes. This only further supports my argument that Morrison's text cannot be pigeonholed into simply one genre. When this is attempted, not only are critics limiting all of the possible dimensions of the text, but they

are doing so haphazardly; it is virtually effortless to ascertain fallacies in each argument as to why Morrison's text falls strictly into one particular genre. Critics Stephen M. Hart, P. Gabrielle Foreman, and Lindsay Moore have all contributed to the focus of magical realism and its application to Morrison's *Beloved*. However, these critics have minimized the correlation of the ghost of Beloved and its relationship to slavery.

## CHAPTER V

### WHO IS MARGARET GARNER? A HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF *BELOVED*

*Beloved* is loosely based upon the true story of a female runaway slave in Kentucky named Margaret Garner. It is through a newspaper clipping provided by Stamp Paid that the historical dimension enters the text. Steven Weisenburger details Garner's ill-fated account in his 1998 text, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child Murder from the Old South*. At about 10 o'clock on Sunday January 27, 1856, eight slaves escaped from the Maplewood<sup>9</sup> estate of Archibald K. Gaines (5), situated in Richmond Station, Boone County, and sixteen miles to the south of Covington in northern Kentucky. When their escape was discovered, a chase quickly ensued. Gaines crossed the Ohio River to Cincinnati and discovered they were hiding in a house of a former slave named Kite, who was Margaret's uncle, near the Mill Creek Bridge. The house was surrounded, but before they could recapture the slaves, Margaret Garner, a twenty-two year old mother of four, slit the throat of her two-year-old daughter, Mary, with a butcher knife, nearly decapitating her (Weisenburger 5). She then tried, unsuccessfully, to do the same with her sons (whom she simply wounded). Garner said

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<sup>9</sup> In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison calls this place "Sweet Home."

when captured that she would rather kill all of her children than have them returned to slavery in Kentucky. Garner's actions brought her to trial for a staggering four weeks and thrust Cincinnati into the spotlight. Hundreds of people showed up daily outside of the courthouse to scrutinize the case:

...To [the public] no case more incisively revealed the pathology of slavery, and no deeds better symbolized the slave's tragic heroism. To proslavery writers her deeds demonstrated that slaves were subhuman. Only a beast would kill its offspring, they reasoned, so Margaret's child-murder proved the bond servant's need for Southern slavery's kindly paternal authority. Both sides agreed that the Margaret Garner case posed crucial questions that divided the Union. For example, was the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which demanded that citizens assent to and assist with capturing fugitive blacks, constitutional? Then came key states' rights questions. How could the state of Ohio, having indicted the adult Garners for murder, accept the federal intervention that set aside the murder charge for Kentuckians' claims to their runaway chattels, a mere property suit? How could property outweigh persons in the scales of Justice? Finally, though, it all boiled down to slavery: could Southerners count on national support for it? How much slavery must Northerners finally stomach? Could Southerners rely on Northerners to return their "property" when it ran away? Could Northerners be *forced* to assist Southerners, when helping was morally, spiritually repugnant (Weisenburger 6)?

The Garner case was, "the longest and most complicated case of its kind" (Weisenburger 285), for the reason that a typical slave trial would be decided in less than a day, but this trial lasted for two weeks and the judge deliberated for another two.

The center concern being deliberated was whether the Garners would be tried as persons, and charged with the murder of their daughter, or tried as property under the Fugitive Slave Law. Which law should take precedence: the state law in Ohio which would protect all of its inhabitants, enabling Garner to be tried for murder, but in a free state (with the hope that a pardon could be plausible), or the federal law which would uphold the Fugitive Slave Law and work in the slave owner's favor? The judge decided

that Federal law prevailed; the defense argued that the Fugitive Slave Act violated the guarantee of religious freedom because it encouraged citizens to perform malevolent deeds by returning slaves. Garner was returned to a slave state along with Gaines, her husband, and her youngest daughter. A warrant was later attempted to be served for Garner to be tried for murder. However, she was unable to be located because her master was continually transporting her to different locations. Gaines put her on a steamboat, *Henry Lewis*, in an attempt to send her to his brother's plantation in Arkansas; the steamboat collided with another boat causing Garner and her child to be thrown overboard. The nine month old drowned; Margaret attempted a similar fate, unsuccessfully. She was then sold into slavery and died of typhoid fever in 1858. Before she died, her husband claimed she pleaded with him to "never marry again in slavery, but to live in hope of freedom" (qtd. in Weisenburger 278).

Garner's quandary and resilient beliefs when it comes to the confines of slavery had a powerful impact on the United States: "Margaret Garner's infanticide spotlighted the plight of women slaves and symbolized slavery's awful, violent power over and within slave families—issues once at the very heart of anti- and proslavery arguments but waylaid for generations in the grand narratives about slavery's constitutional challenges leading to disunion. The current generation of historians has returned to slavery's domestic drama, of the tense relations inside and around the 'Big House' and the dissonant choruses of coercion, resistance, and violence echoing from it" (Weisenburger 9-10). Morrison was one of the first in a century to bring Garner's plight to the forefront again in her novel, *Beloved*. However, Morrison is adamant in her declaration that for the most part *Beloved* is "novel-writing"; she only referenced one journal article containing

the “important things”: the number and sex of Margaret’s children and the “barest facts” of the child-murder (Weisenburger 10).

Morrison appears to align her text with the historical genre from the onset of the narrative; the aforementioned history of Margaret Garner and the incorporation of her attributes into the character of Sethe are apparent. In her foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison states “[she] 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—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense” (XVIII). Given that Morrison desires her readers to have a shared experience with the book’s population, she is already establishing a historical link to her text and a particular time and place in history. Garner’s story provides the ruthless “realism” of the novel; its roots are based in specific historical circumstances.

Walter Clemons focuses his attention on Morrison’s historical roots by curtailing a 1987 *Newsweek* article in which Morrison addresses the “sixty million and more” dedication of her text in his 1998 article, “The Ghosts of Sixty Million and More.” Morrison claims that the sixty million is her best estimation of the number of slaves who never even made it into slavery: they either died on the slave ships or as captives in Africa. Morrison initially began writing the novel about the feeling of “Self,” which she believed women expressed the best through nurturing. The story of Margaret Garner dealt with the nurturing instinct that expressed itself in the form of murder (46), thus her research and storytelling began. It is impractical to question Morrison’s point of view given that she is the author. However, the perceivable quandary with this article is the lack of Clemons’ insight; it appears to be a regurgitation of the *Newsweek* article, rather



than a contribution to the argument about whether or not Morrison's *Beloved* is a historical text.

Linda Krumholz focuses on the belief that Morrison's *Beloved* re-conceptualizes American history by constructing history through the acts and consciousness of African-American slaves rather than through the perspective of the dominant white social class (394) in her 1992 article "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." Krumholz sees the historical methodology as that of a healing process for the characters, the reader, and the author: a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process (395). This very well may be true, however, by focusing on the "rituals of healing" and "the trickster of history," Krumholz is falling short (395-408). Her conclusion, entitled *A Haunting History*, includes the word "haunting" in the title, yet no references are even made to the "haunting" within the text; the obligatory genre alterations and accommodations essential to the once viewed historical context go unaddressed. The "haunting" Krumholz is describing is the horror of slavery, not the ghost story/magical realist components of the text in terms of the poltergeist or apparition.

Morrison also references the horror of slavery in its initial stages in *Beloved*'s stream of consciousness monologue. *Beloved* references, as elusive as it may be, what some believe to be the "Middle Passage" which seems to parallel Krumholz's argument: the iron circles around women's necks; the molding "sea-colored bread"; the piled up corpses; the hot, dark, cramped quarters; the sun peeking through that is so bright that she is forced to close her eyes; "the men without skin bringing us their morning water to drink" (Morrison 248-52). The "men without skin" could be [her] captors, which are the

white men or slave owners. Could Beloved's stream of consciousness monologue depict the anecdote of slaves traveling from Africa to the New World on the "Middle Passage" as part of the Atlantic slave trade? The "Middle Passage" was the stage of triangular trade in which millions of people from Africa were taken to the New World as part of the Atlantic slave trade. Ships departed Europe for African markets with manufactured goods, which were traded for purchased or kidnapped Africans who were transported across the Atlantic as slaves; the slaves were then sold or traded for raw materials (qtd. in Rediker 10), which would be transported back to Europe to complete the voyage. The journey could vary from one to six months depending on the weather conditions: slave ships were overcrowded; slaves were fed one meal a day with water, but only while rations lasted; slaves were often shackled together to save space. Suicide was a common occurrence for slaves, hence another rationale to keep slaves shackled, but self-starvation was another viable tactic (qtd. in Rediker 138-9) due to the scarcity of food, as well as a response to the general protest of the detestable situation on the ship in addition to the inevitable misery which the future holds.

Could all of Beloved's "Middle Passage" references dispel the inference that Beloved is indeed the incarnate of Sethe's murdered daughter, but rather redirect the notion that Beloved is one, or all, metaphorically speaking, of the "sixty million and more" that Morrison dedicated the text to? Also, the epigraph, "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. Romans 9:25" only additionally supports the claim of a group of people as a whole. Furthermore, if the aforementioned is a possibility, Beloved could also be viewed as an incarnation of Sethe's mother. The "hot thing" (Morrison 248-52) Beloved referenced more than once

in her monologue could be the branding iron with the cross symbol that was used to scar Sethe's mother's body. Morrison made it apparent in Sethe's flashbacks that she was overwhelmed and disturbed by the memory that her mother showed her the brand underneath her breast that she could use to identify her body if need be. She also remembers being slapped by her mother when she asked if she could have one. Moreover, Sethe was informed that her mother had other children and threw them all away because they were produced out of rape by a white man and his son; however, she decided to keep Sethe because her father was black. Could this, indeed, be the "Middle Passage" that *Beloved* is referencing? Morrison writes, "the storms rock them and mix the men with the women, the wide shoulders hovering above [Beloved] (Morrison 250)." Is this alluding back to the inference that *Beloved* could be the incarnate of Sethe's mother because Morrison made a point to let the reader know that she was also raped numerous times? While it is debatable what, or whom, *Beloved* actually incarnates and represents, the historical connection, as well as the confused traumatic history which *Beloved* embodies, is unavoidable.

Like Clemons and Krumholz, Stanley Crouch and Ann Snitow also view *Beloved* in a historical context in their 1998 articles, however, without any mention of Margaret Garner or the Middle Passage. Both critics see the text as a novel representing a sort of "blackface" holocaust (Crouch 67) with the focus on black woman behavior in terms of social conditioning. Arguably, both critics still view the text in regard to the historical genre. However, Snitow views Morrison's text as an exorcism of the past memories of the characters versus the spirit itself. Where is the nod to the ghost story or magical realism genres? How can this inescapable genre identity confusion continue to be

overlooked in the works of Walter Clemons, Linda Krumholz, Stanley Crouch, and Ann Snitow? The answer is that it cannot. By focusing on a strictly historical viewpoint, critics are limiting all of the possible dimensions of the text and displaying an ignorance that cannot continue to go unaddressed.

CHAPTER VI  
*BELOVED AS A GOTHIC NOVEL*

Although *Beloved* begins with a ghost, it does not strictly adhere to the gothic genre at the beginning of the text. If the essence of gothic is secrets, danger, mystery, distress, and an increasing sense of foreboding (Harris n. pag.), the ghost at the beginning is quite distinct. The ghost appears to be Sethe's murdered daughter and this notion is accepted by the family. While the ghost has driven Howard and Buglar out of the house, the protagonists have made their peace with it. As the incarnate Beloved threatens Sethe and reveals her past from the "other side," something far more dangerous and mysterious emerges that threatens both the family and the community: a return of all the repressed death and anger of the "sixty million and more."

As aforementioned, critics such as Cedric Gael Bryant<sup>10</sup> have deciphered Morrison's text in relation to that of a gothic novel. However, before we explore the literary voices already utilizing the gothic tropes in their critical essays of *Beloved*, it is essential to differentiate from the other genres and delve into the gothic tropes. Robert Harris does precisely that in his 2008 article, *Elements of the Gothic Novel*, where he focuses on the major components which comprise a conventional gothic novel. Granted,

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Atwood and Kim Hyejin have also focused on the gothic tropes in their articles.

*Beloved* does not take place in a castle with the metonymy of gloom and horror, such as howling winds and creaky door hinges, but the menacing spirit does represent a supernatural and otherwise inexplicable event, which often times in the gothic novel does involve murder in some form: hence, *Beloved* as a child. Also, the spiritual haunting could be seen as an omen for things to come; in this case, the arrival of the incarnation of *Beloved*.

Upon the arrival of the incarnation of *Beloved* at 124 Bluestone Road, Morrison writes:

So he [Paul D] did not press the young woman with the broken hat about where from or how come. If she wanted them to know and was strong enough to get through the telling, she would. What occupied them at the moment was what it might be that she needed. Underneath the major question, each harbored another. Paul D wondered at the newness of her shoes. Sethe was deeply touched by her sweet name; the remembrance of glittering headstone made her feel especially kindly toward her. Denver, however, was shaking (63).

*Beloved* appears to them out of nowhere in front of the house, simply resting on the tree stump. However, *Beloved*'s actual arrival appears to be anything but ordinary. *Beloved* emerges from out of the river; "a fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (60). The woman was exhausted: every part of her body hurt, especially her lungs, she could barely support the weight of her eyelids, her breathing was shallow, and she sounded as if she had asthma, but oddly enough, beyond all of that she was smiling (60). Upon her emergence and crawl toward the mulberry tree, she sleeps through the day and night and does not regain the strength to even lift herself from the ground and totter through the woods to finally rest at the tree stump in front of 124 Bluestone Road until late the next morning. By the time she has expelled all of this energy, she is exhausted again. She can

only keep her eyes open for roughly two minutes at a time and her neck does not have the strength to support the weight of her head. Beloved's actions mirror those of a newborn baby. She does not walk steadily, has no bladder control, has no memory, has impaired speech, begins speaking as if her mouth is learning how to form the words as she goes along, and focuses solely on her "mother" and feels as if she owns her. She also has lineless skin and smooth knuckles; she is wearing a black dress, and two unlaced, nice looking shoes.

All three characters exude various responses in reaction to Beloved's manifestation. Paul D focuses on the newness of Beloved's shoes, noting that she could not have traveled far: nor were her feet disfigured or rough from work on a plantation. This is the first sign in Paul D's mind that Beloved is not at all who she appears to be. Sethe, on the other hand, displays a warmhearted response and is immediately touched by Beloved's name, which reminds her of her own daughter that was taken away from her years prior because of slavery<sup>11</sup>. In addition, Sethe also feels a sudden, overcoming pressure to urinate which is so intense that it is reminiscent of her water breaking. Denver, Sethe's daughter, exhibits a physical response; she begins shaking. Could Denver's reaction illustrate Beloved as a representation of slavery? The incarnation of Beloved has emerged. Is Denver simply afraid of the "ghost," or could it be something more? The initial sight of Beloved as allegory for slavery could be something that Denver fears, not only because she has heard the horrors of it, but is fearful that her mother's

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<sup>11</sup> Upon her arrival, it is not implicitly clear that she is the incarnation of Sethe's daughter.

actions will repeat for a second time<sup>12</sup>. This possibility becomes evident in Denver's stream of consciousness monologue which will be referenced later in greater detail. I would argue that the most obvious shared element amongst the conventional gothic novel and *Beloved* would be the typically lonely, pensive, oppressed female character(s) suffering; many times this is due to abandonment (Harris n. pag). Not only are the central characters abandoned and forced to fend for themselves, but they are often threatened by powerful and impulsive males in power which demand something to occur. The most obvious correlation would be the arrival of Paul D and his exorcism of the spirit from the house.

It is apparent that prior to Paul D's arrival, the three "ladies" have maintained the status quo as depicted in the following passage; "Together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air. For they understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light" (Morrison 4). The statement that Sethe views the battle as "perfunctory" is insightful. The term perfunctory implies that Sethe's response to the haunting is both indifferent and routine. This supports my earlier argument as to why *Beloved* is not a ghost story. Additionally, Sethe appears to know the source of the haunting, or as she puts it, "the source of light" (4). The supernatural occurrence is not correlated with harmful connotations in the eyes of both Sethe and Denver. On the contrary, Paul D's perception is diverse. Paul D's behavior aligns with the gothic trope; he feels the light is a threat to Sethe and himself. He decides to take matters into his own

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<sup>12</sup> It is questionable whether Denver makes this connection on her own, or if her brothers plant this seed before their departure.



hands, regardless of the wishes of the “ladies” of the house, and rid 124 Bluestone Road of at least the “red, undulating light” permanently:

Whatever they were or might have been, Paul D messed them up for good. With a table and a loud male voice he had rid 124 of its claim to local fame. Denver had taught herself to take pride in the condemnation Negroes heaped on them; the assumption that the haunting was done by an evil thing looking for more. None of them knew the downright pleasure of enchantment, of not suspecting but *knowing* the things behind things. Her brothers had known, but it had scared them; Grandma Baby knew, but it saddened her. None could appreciate the safety of ghost company. Even Sethe didn't love it. She just took it for granted—like a sudden change in the weather.

But it was gone now. Whooshed away in the blast of a hazelnut man's shout, leaving Denver's world flat, mostly, with the exception of an emerald closet standing seven feet high in the woods. Her mother had secrets—things she wouldn't tell; things she halfway told. Well, Denver had them too (45).

This passage reeks of melancholy and disappointment amongst both Sethe and Denver.

Sethe admits that she did not love the “ghost company,” but took it for granted. There is an intrinsic loss that Sethe appears to be exuding: the loss of her daughter, yet again.

Sethe initially appears grateful that Paul D has arrived, rid the house of the haunting, and provided human contact that she desperately longs for; however, upon further

introspection it becomes clear that Sethe is now plagued with not only the absence of the spirit, but the reminder of the absence of Halle as well. Rather than the removal of the

spirit allowing her to escape the past and move on with her future, the arrival of Paul D does the opposite; the mere sight of him is a constant reminder of her past which she is

already deeply submerged in. Paul D also serves as a constant reminder of their link to Halle since they all lived at Sweet Home together. The absence of the spirit appears to

take with it what little comfort and a real “human” connection that Sethe has left. Sethe

also appears to feel guilty that Denver is lonely and is forced to find comfort and solitude

in her “emerald closet” (Morrison 34). Denver is disappointed that she too is abandoned yet again; she felt abandoned by the death of Beloved and the disappearance of her father. These notions become clear in both Denver and Sethe’s stream of consciousness monologues. These monologues expose the secrets of the conscience of the characters, therefore further exploring the secrets of history.

In the first of the monologues, Sethe finally makes a mental and emotional connection to her own mother. Sethe attempts to distinguish the rejection that she felt at the hands of her mother, compared to the rejection that Beloved must have felt at the hands of Sethe. Sethe believes that her mother must have been hanged because she unsuccessfully attempted to escape and leave her only daughter behind; whereas, Sethe did not abandon Beloved, but rather loved her so much that she wanted to save her and prevent her from living a miserable life as a slave. Sethe secured Beloved’s safety by choosing to instead live a lifetime of guilt herself for murdering her own child, rather than allow Beloved to suffer (236-41). She is haunted for life both literally, by the ghost of Beloved, and figuratively, by reliving the murder that she committed. This is supported by textual evidence throughout the novel; Sethe is continually trying to find ways to explain to Beloved what transpired, which shows she blames herself and is continually attempting to find means to justify her actions.

In Denver’s stream of consciousness monologue, it finally gives the reader insight into her unspoken thoughts which focus primarily on family bonds, or the lack thereof:

Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother’s milk. The first thing I hear after not hearing anything was the sound of her crawling up the stairs. She was my secret company until Paul D came. He threw her out. Ever since I was little she was my company and she helped me wait for my daddy. Me and her waited for him. I love my mother, but I know she

killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it. She missed killing my brothers and they knew it. They told me die-witch! stories to show me the way to do it, if ever I needed to (242).

Great deals of insight, as well as a wide array of thoughts are exhibited within Denver's monologue. Denver begins by stating that Beloved is her sister and she consumed her blood. The inclusion of blood depicts an incredibly strong bond between Beloved and herself: one of "blood sisters" if you will. Denver also displays an extreme vulnerability in regards to her safety when it comes to her mother; her brothers gave her advice on how to kill Sethe if she "needed" to, not if she ever "decides" to. Denver implies that Howard and Buglar ran away not for fear of the ghost, but rather fear of their own mother. Denver claims that she fears that her mother will murder her, just as she so easily found validity for killing Beloved. What would prevent Sethe from doing it again? Denver's revelation about her mother aligns itself into the gothic realm by establishing a potential impending doom which could transpire at any moment. Denver believes the force that overpowered her mother and triggered her to slaughter Beloved "comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to" (Morrison 242). This is why Denver chooses to remain inside the house and watch over the yard; to prevent a sudden attack by either an outside entity or her own mother if necessary.

All of the tragedies in Denver's life are linked to the loss of Beloved:

"The baby," said Denver. "Didn't you hear her crawling?"  
What to jump on first was the problem: that Denver heard anything at all or that the crawling already? baby girl was still at it but more so. The return of Denver's hearing, cut off by an answer she could not bear to hear, cut on by the sound of her dead sister trying to climb the stairs, signaled another shift in the fortunes of the people

of 124. From then on the presence was full of spite. Instead of sighs and accidents there was pointed and deliberate abuse (122).

Denver claims she went deaf right before she could hear the horrific explanation of what her mother did to Beloved; her hearing returned when she heard the baby ghost crawling up the stairs; her brothers run away, leaving her alone, because they are fearful of their mother because of what she was capable of doing to Beloved; her father abandons the family, but only because he has a nervous breakdown and slathers butter all over his face after he witnesses Sethe being raped and the milk extruded from her breasts by the hands of their slave owner's nephews (this milk was produced in order to sustain Beloved); Baby Suggs dies after falling into a deep depression after the black community failed to warn her about schoolteacher's impending arrival in order for her to possibly prevent the tragedy. Just as Baby Suggs was let down by the black community, so is Denver; not only is Denver shunned by the black community at large for her mother's ramifications, but the talk amongst the community about the presence at their home does not fare well for Denver either, only leading to more isolation and loneliness. It is ironic that even though Denver and Sethe are "free" they are still suffering. Denver believes that Beloved returns for her. Denver can now take care of her, while Beloved can provide comfort and companionship in an attempt to reconstruct a family unit and undo all of the vile deeds previously committed; the arrival of Beloved represents the possibility of a clean slate for Denver.

However, Denver's admiration for Beloved quickly yields itself to jealousy, as well as fear. Denver was initially worried about protecting Beloved from their mother, but it never occurred to Denver that possibly Beloved would attempt to avenge her own

death by getting even with Sethe. That is, until Denver witnessed her mother appearing to be strangled. The gothic threat is now real:

“You did it, I saw you,” said Denver.

“What?”

“I saw your face. You made her choke.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“You told me you loved her.”

“I fixed it, didn’t I? Didn’t I fix her neck?”

“After. After you choked her neck.”

“I kissed her neck. I didn’t choke it. The circle of iron choked it.”

“I saw you.” Denver grabbed Beloved’s arm.

“Look out, girl,” said Beloved and, snatching her arm away, ran ahead as fast as she could along the stream that sang on the other side of the woods.

Left alone, Denver wondered if, indeed, she had been wrong. She and Beloved were standing in the trees whispering, while Sethe sat on the rock. Denver knew that clearing used to be where Baby Suggs preached, but that was when she was a baby. She had never been there herself to remember it. 124 and the field behind it were all the world she knew or wanted (119).

Denver begins to question if what she saw was real. She accuses Beloved of strangling Sethe, but it is as if Denver feels as though she is being disloyal to Beloved; Denver craved companionship and just as quickly, without certainty, she will turn against and abandon Beloved just as her family and the black community has done to her. Beloved’s breathe smelled like milk and the fingers around Sethe’s neck felt like those of the baby ghost, but Sethe does not want to believe such things either. Sethe begins to wonder if the concept of Beloved strangling her from afar was even plausible.

If one were to argue that women in distress were the only essential trope to the gothic novel, Denver and Sethe provide pages upon pages of textual evidence for that argument. However, there are other gothic factors present in the text that Cedric Gael Bryant points out in his 2005 article. In “*The Soul has Bandaged Moments: Reading the African American Gothic in Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Morrison’s *Beloved*, and*

Gomez's *Gilda*," Cedric Gael Bryant focuses on the animalistic adjectives used to describe Sethe and her actions in the text, then links Morrison's metaphors to those of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The correlation appears extreme. Although there is a plethora of textual evidence as to why *Beloved* could be interpreted as a gothic novel as I have mentioned earlier, the Bram Stoker's *Dracula* castle correlation is a bit much. Moreover, Bryant believes *Beloved* is gothic "precisely because it succeeds in speaking the unspeakable about the haunting effects of slavery on the human psyche" and the desperate attempts that dehumanized persons make to survive in a world where we are all victims of something (550); again, the mere mention of the "haunting effects of slavery" reveal a potentially hybridized historical incorporation overlooked yet again by critics. Furthermore, there is another "unspoken" textual inference that went overlooked without any mention directly; one which I would argue is quite mysterious and gothic in nature.

Morrison begins her text with a simple sentence: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom." 124 clearly symbolizes something; when one reads further down the page it becomes clear that 124 is the address of the gray and white house on Bluestone Road (Morrison 3). At this point, the "full of a baby's venom" reference is still elusive. However, the fact that Morrison would begin her book with a simple number was perplexing. Sure, it is an address, but is the address important enough to be the opening sentence and introduction to the novel? Is a simple number significant enough to be the subject, as well as the only noun, and part of the simplest three word sentence possible? Upon further inspection, Morrison's novel is separated into three distinct sections. Part one begins: "124 was spiteful" (3). Part two begins: "124 was loud" (199). Part three begins: "124 was quiet" (281). It is evident that the three sections are describing an

apparent chronological order of things; 124 was spiteful because it is haunted by the ghost of a baby; 124 was loud because upon the conclusion of part one, Stamp Paid had informed Paul D of Sethe's past, he walked away, and now the house is loud with all of Sethe's, Denver's, and Beloved's unspoken thoughts that are screaming out from inside the house as Stamp Paid stands on the porch; 124 was quiet because a role reversal has occurred between Beloved and Sethe, and Beloved no longer has to struggle to take control; she already has it. Now there is a stillness upon the house. Now that the section breaks are apparent, what is the significance of the number 124?

Sethe gave birth to four children: Howard, Buglar, Beloved<sup>13</sup>, and Denver. Upon the arrival of the schoolteacher to recapture her, in an act of desperation Sethe slits the throat of her oldest daughter, Beloved; thus murdering the third born of her children. Therefore, 124 Bluestone symbolizes the existence in the physical realm and living in the house: the first born, Howard; the second born, Bulgar, and the fourth born, Denver. Accordingly, 1-2-4. The fact that "3" in the sequence is missing is representative of the third born child missing: Beloved. Also, when the incarnation appears, Here Boy, the family dog that was disfigured in one of the ghost's angry attacks, disappears. This would also lead the reader to believe that the incarnation is indeed that of the murdered daughter, Beloved, for the reason that Here Boy disappeared. Clearly, the dog would not want to be around whatever hurt him previously, leading all fingers to point toward Beloved.

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that the name "Beloved" was assigned to the murdered child and grew out of Sethe's misunderstanding of "Dearly Beloved" as spoken by the preacher at her funeral. The two-year-old child is never identified by any name other than "Beloved" throughout the entirety of the text.

Furthermore, why does a “red, undulating light” appear when Paul D arrives (Morrison 10)? Why red? The color red is frequently used in gothic writing, just as there are many references to the color red in Morrison’s text. The red light could be representative of the bloodshed in the time of slavery. Is the “red, undulating light” a symbol of the blood that was shed when Sethe slit the throat of her daughter to prevent her from living her life in slavery (Morrison 10)? It is stated that when the schoolteacher arrives and Sethe slits the throat of Beloved, Sethe is nursing Denver, who actually ingests some of Beloved’s red blood with her mother’s milk. Paul D, Sethe, and Denver attend the carnival prior to Beloved’s arrival and for once feel like a happy family; however, there is an overabundance of red roses that were dying, overly fragrant, and therefore equated with the stench of death (Morrison 57). Beloved’s headstone is pink, a variation of the color red, sprinkled with glittering chips:

Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes and I’ll do it for free. Ten minutes for seven letters. For another ten could she have gotten “Dearly” too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby’s headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new. That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust (Morrison 5).

The revealing past of the characters in the text is brought about through Beloved’s mere presence or inquiries. It is through Morrison’s storytelling that readers gain vital information about the character’s past, as well as America’s history. Moreover, Beloved also possesses supernatural strength which pushes her into a realm beyond that of simply



the physical world. Upon her arrival, when she can barely walk and keep her eyes open, Paul D and Denver observe her lift the rocking chair above her head with one hand; this action is reminiscent of a poltergeist (World English Dictionary). She displays uncanny behavior on several occasions throughout the text: she has an insatiable desire for sweets, but no other food; she drinks an exorbitant amount of water, as well as milk; she exhibits intense mood swings and speaks in voices as though she were different people at different times in different realms, by telling Denver, "In the dark my name is Beloved" (88); she either sleeps for days at a time, or not at all. Her actions and behavior are confusing. Sometimes Beloved loves; she dances with Denver. Other times she hates; she whips Sethe. Beloved could be described as mysterious, as she seems to represent paradox and contradictions, and as the text progresses a power struggle appears to emerge between Beloved and Sethe.

In Beloved's attempt to overpower Sethe and take control, a step along the way appears to be for Beloved to begin replacing Sethe; this becomes evident, when like Sethe, Beloved also begins to engage in sexual relations with Paul D. The rusted tobacco tin that Paul D carries around in his pocket bursts open while he is having intercourse with Beloved. There is a reference made to his "red heart, red heart, red heart" (138) which is now essentially beating again and able to feel emotions that had long ago ceased to exist prior to his rendezvous with Beloved. There is, yet again, another reference to the color red. Furthermore, Beloved becomes pregnant from her sexual encounter with Paul D. Does Morrison use the pregnancy between Beloved and Paul D as a metaphor for the Pandora's Box that slavery can unleash? Take into account that it was also very common for slave owners to have sexual relations and impregnate their slaves; this very notion

was alluded to by Lucy Stone in Margaret Garner's trial. Could this be another use of Morrison's allegory that brings every potential facet together? Stamp Paid also feels both the unmistakable separation, as well as the pain that resides in the house of 124 Bluestone Road and aborts his attempts because of this:

Stamp Paid abandoned his efforts to see about Sethe, after the pain of knocking and not gaining entrance, and when he did, the pain of 124 was left to its own devices. When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds. Almost. Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house, recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken (235).

Upon looking through the window at the two backs of the women in 124 Bluestone Road, he hurries down the steps and believes the "undecipherable" voices belong to the "black and angry dead" (234). The mention of the term "backs" is also noticeable because it references looking at things that are behind you; hence, living in the past. Is this another textual reference "to the sixty million and more"? What is also ironic about this passage is that Stamp Paid believes there are unspoken thoughts, but these unspeakable and unspoken thoughts are put into words in the form of stream of consciousness monologues by the female characters. Morrison incorporates literary devices: personification, symbolism, allusions, metaphors, allegory, and imagery throughout the entire text to display the undeniable correlation between the incarnation of *Beloved* and slavery.

## CHAPTER VII

### “THIS IS NOT A STORY TO PASS ON”

At the conclusion of the novel, Sethe is weakened, fatigued, and almost incoherent, just as slaves routinely felt after working hours in the sun. Sethe believes that her slave master, the schoolteacher, is a horrible man whom she despises for what he “makes” her do to her daughter. However, it is as if Beloved has now taken the schoolteacher’s place; Sethe is now whipped at the hands of her daughter. In an attempt to prevent Beloved from becoming the schoolteacher’s slave, Sethe has now allowed herself to become Beloved’s slave. It is a warped reversal of the master/slave relationship.

Thirty church going women of the town show up outside of the house to sing in order to “blow the devil away”; Beloved is subsequently forced to flee (308). It is important to note that the community women do not show up to question the existence of the supernatural. They show up to show their support for Denver and Sethe, and to exorcise Beloved out of the home. The “devil” that the women are referencing is not the incarnation of Beloved per se, but rather the impact that slavery has had on African Americans in the time of the Civil War. This is a monumental turning point in the novel;

Baby Suggs felt abandoned previously by her community because they knew that the schoolteacher was coming to recapture Sethe and the children, but did not warn them of his impending arrival, therefore she had no opportunity to prevent the calamity.

Morrison's inclusion of the sudden support of the black community is paramount; Baby Suggs blamed the "whitepeople" for the wickedness of slavery, by claiming, "there was no bad luck in the world but whitepeople" (122). However, this passage shows that "whitepeople" were not solely to blame in the case of the child-murder. This inference opens up the eyes of many. Stamp Paid appears to share a similar epiphany on the different races that are to blame and are affected by slavery when he states:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own (234).

Stamp Paid's passage gives insight into the community at large. Granted, they were not there for Baby Suggs and her family when they needed them initially, but they are making up for it now. They show their support and reconciliation by rallying around the family and not only ridding the house of the nuisance known as Beloved, but by preventing Sethe from killing an innocent man. If her community was not present to show their newfound support, Sethe would have killed Mr. Bodwin; she thought he was

the schoolteacher. This shows Sethe's immersion in the past. However, this incident, in addition to the choice that she made this time around, is revealing of Sethe's growth. When the "real" schoolteacher first arrived eighteen years prior, in retaliation she killed her daughter to prevent her from living her life in slavery; now, rather than murder Denver, she goes after who she believes is the schoolteacher. This passage serves as a "do-over" for Sethe; if she could go back in time she would make a different decision. This situation would have ended quite differently had it not been for the support of her community; everyone worked together to learn from past mistakes in order to prevent future pain. It is when the community gets together and shares their "dead Negro's grief" as a collective whole that the secrets are revealed, rather than repressed, and the healing process may begin. Everyone in the community is affected by the horrors of slavery, not just Sethe and her family.

It is significant that the novel should end with a reconciliation scene between Sethe and Paul D. His last words to her, "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow (322)," expresses a degree of hope for the future, just as America is consistently trying to put the notion of slavery behind us. Not only that, but an acknowledgement of some hope for the future demonstrates that both Sethe and Paul D have grown enough as individuals to come to terms with the past and begin to start life anew. The epilogue, which is punctured by the refrain "It is not a story to pass on," is an idea that is echoed by Morrison herself when she states that slavery of the past is something everyone wants to forget (324). On the final page of her novel, Morrison writes:

They forgot her [Beloved] like a bad dream... What made her think her fingernails could open locks the rain rained out? Sometimes the

photographs of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do. This is not a story to pass on (334).

It is clear through this final passage that Morrison is echoing reminders of slavery that still linger today. The incarnation of Beloved is a symbolic representation of the horrors of slavery that America endured during the nineteenth-century. When Morrison writes, “they can touch if they want, but don't,” (334) she is referencing the constant reminder of slavery that exists in photographs, stories, and history. Society chooses not to touch slavery, not only because so many do not want to remember it, but because slavery is not a tangible object that can be touched. Slavery, no matter how appalling it may have been, is part of our history; just as Margaret Garner was a real woman forced into a desperate situation. These tainted pasts may be buried deep within our history and all of us for a variety of reasons, but the injustices of “sixty million and more” can never be forgotten.

## CHAPTER VIII

### AN INTENTIONAL HYBRIDIZING OF GENRES IN *BELOVED*

Many critics have attempted to pigeonhole Morrison's novel; is it a historical novel, a ghost story, a magical realist novel, or a gothic novel? In an attempt to pigeonhole Morrison's novel into one genre, critics are eradicating all of the possible dimensions of the text and diminishing the novel to a false reduction. It is abundantly clear that the correct answer is that the novel is a hybridization of all of the aforementioned genres. This hybridization has come about through the evolution of the genres as the text progresses. It is a historical novel deeply rooted in slavery and loosely based on the plight of Margaret Garner. It is a ghost story of a house haunted by a menacing spirit that throws furniture and places tiny handprints in cakes. It is a magical realist novel that establishes the apparition and paranormal as the norm within a society. It is a gothic novel that focuses on the lonely, pensive, distressed, and oppressed women suffering for copious reasons. Morrison's writing methodology is not accidental; the genre progression that takes place throughout Morrison's text is well thought out and essential to understanding the dynamics within the pages. Morrison could have constructed a ghost story about a spirit haunting the house of 124 Bluestone Road; instead she decided to manifest that spirit. It is through Morrison's manifestation of

Beloved that the true intent of the novel is illustrated. A spirit could be justified or disregarded, just as the acknowledgement of slavery is often ignored. Not as an act of ignorance, but as a painful memory that people want to forget. When Morrison manifests the spirit, she forces the characters within the text, and more importantly the readers, to address the situation. Morrison encourages the community to come together, to share stories of likeness and strife. This community support will only assist with the revealing of secrets, rather than the continued repression of them. It is through this assemblage and the pursuit of commonality that the evolution of isolatable genres leads to the end of isolation itself; the amalgamation of the community parallels the hybridization of the genres. Hybridizing the various genres creates a multifaceted text which allows the readers to comprehend, confront, and more importantly, feel the bigger picture: the lingering effects of slavery.



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