

## On Artistic Characteristics of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

CHENG Huimin<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Fine Arts College, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, China.  
\*Corresponding author.

Received 14 January 2014; accepted 23 March 2014  
Published online 2 April 2014

### Abstract

Toni Morrison is a famous African American writer. She is the first African American Nobel Prize winner, to a great degree; Toni Morrison has influenced American literature. She has made great contribution to black American literature. The critics and scholars have paid a great attention to her achievements in novels. Till now Morrison has finished 9 novels. Among them, her fifth novel *Beloved* is considered the best. *Beloved* has won 1988 Pulitzer Prize and Robert F. Kennedy Award. This paper will center on such artistic characteristics as magic narration technique, employment of archetypes and utilization of the symbols. Through systematic analysis of the novel, the reader can better appreciate Morrison's writing features.

**Key words:** Artistic characteristics; Magic narration; Archetypes; Symbols

CHENG Huimin (2014). On Artistic Characteristics of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 10(3), 102-105. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/4674>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4674>

### INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, USA. Morrison excelled in high school, graduated from Howard University, and received her master's degree from Cornell University. Initially opting for a career as a teacher and editor, Morrison became an instructor at several historical black universities and worked for Random House. She brought such as Angela

Davis and Toni Cade Bambara to national prominence. Morrison began her first novel *The Bluest Eye* while she taught at Howard University. It was published in 1970. Till now she has finished and published 9 novels. Among them, her fifth novel *Beloved* is considered as her masterpiece. *Beloved* has won 1988 Pulitzer Prize and Robert F. Kennedy Award. In 1993, she won the Nobel Prize for Literature. She is the first American writer of African origin, and only American woman since Pearl S. Buck, to obtain such an everlasting glory. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for her novel *Beloved*. *Beloved* was set during the reconstruction era in 1873. Morrison paints a dark and powerful portrait of the dehumanizing effects of slavery. For the former slaves in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and fully try to forget. Yet for Sethe the protagonist of the novel, memories of the past are inescapable, because she cannot walk out of the shadow of the past. They continue to haunt her, literally, in the spirit of her deceased daughter. Eighteen years earlier, Sethe had murdered this daughter in order to save her from a life of slavery. In fact, Morrison borrowed the event from the real story of Margaret Garner, who, like Sethe, escaped from the slavery in Kentucky and attempted to murder all her children and succeeded in killing her baby girl when the slave catchers caught up with her in Ohio. *Beloved* straddles the line between fiction and history. Through the use of her unique and remarkable style Morrison presents the reader with glimpses of the past which creep through both the cracks in Sethe's memory and the plot of the novel, revealing a desperate act of love more haunting than any baby ghost. Due to the horror of slavery Sethe's murder of Beloved is transformed into what Morrison controversially deems 'the ultimate gesture of a loving mother', whose action proclaims, 'to kill my children is preferable to having them die. From a single family's experiences, Morrison shows how the psychological and historical legacy of slavery influences a family.

As the first African American Nobel Prize winner, to a great degree, Toni Morrison has greatly influenced American literature. The critics have paid a great attention to her achievements in novels. Especially in recent years, studying Toni Morrison's novels is a very hot topic. There are a large number of essays and book-length studies on various topics in different methodologies. Of course, as a representative work of Toni Morrison's, *Beloved* is also hotly discussed. Some critics wrote some essays to comment this novel from different perspectives. In short, Morrison's work has attracted wide attention of the academic circle, and more and more people use a variety of academic literary theory to analyze the novel. Normally such fields are hotly discussed as psychological, feminist and cultural perspectives, and so on. From the whole, our research has achieved a great breakthrough.

On the basis of a careful reading of the novel, this paper will analyze such artistic characteristics as magic narration technique, employment of archetypes and utilization of the symbols. From the analyses above, the reader can fully understand Toni Morrison and her novel *Beloved*. At the same time, a new angle is provided here for the reader to study Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

## 1. MAGIC NARRATION TECHNIQUE

As a contemporary novelist, Toni Morrison often adopts magic narrative technique to reconstruct the history of the black. Morrison penetrates deeply into the unknown story of the black mothers and daughters and encourages them to confront the painful past to make sense of the present trauma. In fact, the characters in *Beloved* are living in the painful conflict between the imperative to remember and the desperate need to forget. Morrison utilizes the special narrative structure to convey the theme and the content of the novel. First of all, it breaks the traditional linear narrative structure and makes the past and the present interact frequently during the narration.

Toni Morrison broke the traditional time order and the linear structure in this novel *Beloved* in which the past and the present are juxtaposed. The Juxtaposition of past and present are used to strengthen ideological theme. The past is alive in the moment, and give us the pieces to work with and Morrison combines them into one indivisible whole story to be gazed at. A lot of readers are very interested in studying the structure of *Beloved*. It is not a linear tale which was told from the very beginning to the end. It is a story which encompasses all kind of levels of past, from the slave ship to Sweet Home, as well as the present. Sometimes the past is told in flashbacks, sometimes in stories, and sometimes it is plainly told, as if it were happening in the present as Morrison frequently uses the present tense. Most of the chapters are used present tense, but as the narration develops, the past tense invaded the present, but such chapters as Chapter

10, Chapter 13, Chapter 15, Chapter 16 and Chapter 18 begin the narration with the events happened before 1873 or the memories of main character of the novel. And such chapters as Chapter 20, Chapter 21, Chapter 22 and Chapter 23 are the character's monologue. There are a lot of interleaving between the current and the past. It is difficult for the reader to distinguish between the past and the present.

Viewed from the whole, in order to link the past with the present and show how the past influences the present, Morrison arrange *Beloved* who functions as the past to arise from the dead. She talks with Sethe and plays with Denver and makes love with Paul D. Although Sethe deliberately forgets the past, she remains in the memory of 18 years ago. Her sense of guilt for killing her daughter exists in the depth of her heart. She has been seeking the opportunities to explain to her daughter Beloved. Here Morrison implies that Sethe becomes the slave of the past. Under the protection of Sethe, Denver knows little about the past and lives in infinite loneliness. But Beloved's arrival gives her a lot of pleasure. Through describing Denver's changes after Beloved's arrival, Morrison wants to show that people cannot divorce from the past. After Paul D makes love with Beloved, He decides to begin a new life with Sethe. Obviously, facing the past directly brings his courage to begin his new life in the future. Morrison's such arrangements are not something out of nothing but a specific performance for her to elucidate the main theme of this novel. Standing on the turning point in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Morrison deeply feels that past and present are inseparable. In history she tries to seek the roots which cause the present black people in terrible plight. Morrison traces its sources in history and directly touches the period of slavery. As she writes on the title page of *Beloved* "Sixty Million and more" And this kind of structure does a good job to pave the way for the end of the story.

At the same time, the narrative ambiguity contributed many magical properties of the novel. Toni Morrison has gained the highest achievement due to the publishing of the novel *Beloved*. Because it is a narration resistance in many ways, it can be easily generated clear ambiguity which made the readers cannot fully understand. The narrator tells the story to the readers and the readers are encouraged to participate to the storytelling.

## 2. EMPLOYMENT OF ARCHETYPES

Toni Morrison grows up in America and she finished her studies in American modern formal schools. Morrison acquaints herself with knowledge of western cultures, including those myths. And sometimes she applies the western myth in her novels as prototypes. But the presence of the western myths in her works is not simply the textural influence. Rather, it is the admixture of the

western canons and the life and experiences of African-American. By using biblical myths as archetypes, Morrison reconstructs literally the tradition of black culture, such as the case in *Beloved*. Morrison's skillful use of Biblical allusions creates an atmosphere riddled with force and drama. *Beloved* is meant to be more than a story. It is not only a history but also a life.

Water is a frequently used as the important image in *Beloved*. According to the Bible, water is used to refer to God's punishment of mankind. At the same time, it is a symbol of hope and new life. Noah's ark story and the floodwater are presented in Chapter Six of Nine of *Old Testament*. God inclines to destroy all life by the means of floodwater as the earth was corrupted before God and was filled with iniquity. At that time, only Noah's family and the property were safe under the protection of the God. God shows mercy to his family and lets him make an ark to save his family, his animals and his plants from the coming flood. And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of ground, both man and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven, and they were destroyed from the earth. And Noah's family remained alive and they were blessed by the God in an ark. Thus Noah's ark provides hope for human beings. It is the symbol of hope and rebirth. In *Beloved*, we can find the same plot which echoes with the story of the *Bible*. In this novel the rain water is regarded as the most powerful thing. It is the right thing to decide everything. It can completely change people's power. As to those black slaves in the American South, the rain can be considered as a medium which is able to help those helpless slaves succeed in finding freedom. In this novel the rain lasted a month. The ground is full of mud which allowed the slaved worked together and escape. "The field was a marsh, the track a through. All Georgia seemed to be sliding melting away (p.111). And "the flood rains of a month ago had turned everything to steam and blossoms" Paul D, the only Buffalo man left follows those tree flowers to the North as the warm spring spreads from south to north just like Noah, Paul D survived the rain and becomes a liberated man (p.112). He got to the "Free North. Magical North" (p.112) and he got his freedom. The image of rain here, Morrison wants to make the rain water become the symbol of new life and hope. It has the power to destroy; at the same time it has the power to gestate life.

According to analysis of the archetypes in the *Bible* in *Beloved*, there are obvious traces from the *Bible*. As a matter of fact, Morrison's novel *Beloved* is parody of the *Bible*, a symbol of authority in western cultures. She signifies upon the dominant discourse by means of realistic description and fantastic distortion of the authoritative discourse-the *Bible*. Ironically, these amendments have hinted in the novel. The identity of

Africans slaves is not only impossible, but also to prevent the establishment of African American identity. The Bible is considered to be the gospel of whites, and blacks suffering. This is a wrong book, and it is full of lies for the blacks.

### 3. UTILIZATION OF THE SYMBOLS

Toni Morrison's novels have attracted attention of the academic circle because of her creative fusion of realism and fantasy. Morrison created an eerie and magical world of the reality which showed in a unique way, and the novels leave a strong impact to readers. She created a magical world in *Beloved*, and symbols are used in *Beloved*. Black people's physical and psychological harm are displayed. Morrison narrated the whole story from the perspective of black people, reflecting the reality. The following discussion will center on the symbols in *Beloved*.

First, readers can often meet the words Sweet Home, which is a plantation in Kentucky. It sounds like a paradise. Morrison gives the plantation a sweet name which shows Toni Morrison's ironic attitude. In fact, it is not sweet. Physical and psychological harm are often done to the slaves by the slave owners who treat slaves as their personal property. At first, the slaves do not know about the truth of the slavery and they never realize they were living in the slavery. Under the rule of Mr. Garner, the slaves are taught to read and write, even to handle guns. He allows one of his slaves Halle, Sethe's husband, to purchase the freedom of his mother Baby Suggs with five years' Sunday work. Mrs. Garner also gives Sethe freedom to choose her husband. The master allows his slaves to "correct them, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a mother, choose a horse or a wife" (p.125). They are complacent about being called as "men". They never realize that "definition belonged to the definers—not the defined" (p.190). However, this allowed manhood doesn't change the basic relationships between the slave owner and the slaves. But when Mr. Garner died and his brother, Schoolteacher, comes to the Sweet Home to take charge of the slaves, things change and they change in such a way as to force the slaves into the terrible recognition of the reasons for—and the implications of—their enslavement. Schoolteacher, the new slave owner, doesn't call the slaves "men" as Mr. Garner did, but teaches them that "they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespasses among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke. Schoolteacher's work involves measuring his slaves' heads in order to demarcate their bestial qualities and his teaching consists largely of lessons in white

supremacy—instruction in the “knowledge” that blacks are animals and that the white race has both a right and an obligation to treat slaves as such. The Schoolteacher teaches his nephews that they should “put her (Sethe’s) human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (p.193). Schoolteacher is, in short, teaching his pupils that the slaves are not fully human, that they are part animal and therefore, categorically inferior to whites and naturally subject to their domination. Schoolteacher’s epistemic violation of his slaves—his writings and lectures about their animal nature—find physical expression in his nephews’ assault on Sethe, during which they hold her down and suck her milk as if she were a cow or a goat and then beat her severely when she reports their actions to the ailing plantation mistress, Mrs. Garner. Sethe then frees herself and her unborn child from captivity by running away from Sweet Home—hurried less by the beating than by the violation, and less by the violation itself than by what that violation represents—a definition of herself and her children that she is unwilling to accept on the one hand and powerless to disprove on the other. The slaves know what might be on the slave owner’s mind so they come to awaken. They refuse to live a life full of lies and decide to make plans to escape.

Morrison uses Sweet Home to imply the cheat and wickedness of slavery. From the above discussed, the reader can see that Morrison uses the symbols to reveal the reality in the novel. She creates a series of symbols to convey the profound meanings and make the theme of this novel deepened.

---

## CONCLUSION

As a critical thinking and creative writer, Morrison won the respect of other writers and readers. She has been among the ranks of mainstream American writer. She has undoubtedly become a major voice among black writers. She has a huge social responsibility and national consciousness of black writers. In her works, Morrison focused on history. In her works she describes black woman has suffered not only race, class, and gender discrimination, but also the history of slavery let black

women become tools to work for the slave owner. To some extent, all of her novels are historical novels in which characters are subject to history. *Beloved* is a novel which explores the history and culture of African Americans. It explores slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt those who were slaves but now in freedom. *Beloved* focuses on the painful theme. Even the characters have got the freedom but they cannot walk out of the shadow of the past, because they cannot forget the physical, emotional and spiritual destruction caused by slavery in the past. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison coordinates the literary genre with the black people’s traditional culture and special cosmology to reflect the reality of the lives of African Americans. Such artistic techniques as magic narration technique, employment of mythological archetypes and utilization of the symbols are displayed in this novel. And these artistic techniques are expressed effectively to reflect the realistic significance.

---

## REFERENCES

- Furman, J. (1996). *Toni Morrison’s fiction*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Linden, P. (Ed.) (1998). *Toni Morrison: Contemporary critical essays*. New York: St.Martin’s Press.
- Morrison, T. (2005). *Beloved*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Nellie, M. (1994). *An interview with Toni Morrison*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Ron, D. (2000). *Toni Morrison explained: A reader’s map to the novels*. New York: Random House.
- Tang, H. M. (2006). *Race gender and identity-A study of novels by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison*. Beijing: Nation Press.
- Wang, L. L. (2010). *Identity-building in Toni Morrison’s trilogy: Beloved, Jazz and Paradise*. Xiamen: Xiamen University Press.
- Wang, S. R., & Wu, X. Y. (1999). *Gender race culture: Toni Morrison and american black literature of 20<sup>th</sup> century*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- Zeng, M. (2010). *Cultural positing of Toni Morrison’s fictions*. Jinan: Shandong People Press.
- Zhang, R. W. (2009). *Studies on Toni Morrison*. Beijing: China Social Science Press.