

# “The Beauty and the Pain”:

## Image of the Tree in *Beloved*

### LA BEAUTÉ ET LA DOULEUR:

### IMAGE DE L'ARBRE DANS *BELOVED*

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**Abstract:** This thesis explores the complicated images of the trees in *Beloved*. The archetypal image of the tree as tree of life reflect the pastoral “beauty” in the south by its regenerative power which assists the black slaves to gain physical flight from the slavery and the former slaves from the psychological grip of the slavery past. The “strange fruit” of the southern trees and the tree-like scar in Sethe’s back reveals the “pain” in the slavery south. *Beloved*’s seemingly perverse image as the residue of the slavery past aggravates this “pain”, but her foils to a revived tree stump representing the tree of history and to the metamorphosing tree-god Dionysus help the former slaves rebuild the bond with their past, thus retrieve the lost “beauty” in the south. In this sense, the continuity between the two seemingly contradicting concepts—“beauty” and “pain” is established.

**Key words:** beauty, pain, life; history, continuity

**Résumé:** Le présent article explore les images compliquées de l’arbre dans *Beloved*. L’image archétypique de l’arbre, comme l’arbre de vie, reflète la « beauté » pastorale du Sud par sa force régénératrice de l’arbre qui aide les noirs à acquérir la liberté et à se débarrasser du joug mental imprimé sur leur coeur par l’esclavagisme. Le « fruit insolite » sur l’arbre du Sud et la cicatrice en forme d’arbre sur le dos de Sethe révèlent la « douleur » du Sud sous l’esclavagisme. Et *Beloved*, qui représente l’ombre laissé par l’histoire esclavagiste dans la vie des noirs, aggrave cette douleur. Mais l’image de la souche de résurrection et l’image du dieu de l’arbre permettent aux noirs de rétablir le lien avec le passé pour retrouver la « beauté » oubliée dans le Sud. En ce sens, la continuité entre la beauté et la douleur, deux notions apparemment contradictoires, semble être établie.

**Mots-Clés:** beauté, douleur, vie, histoire, continuité

## INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is the first of her trio combing the history of African American history. It narrates a gothic story of *Beloved*, the incarnation of Sethe’s murdered daughter, to frame the former slaves’ arduous struggle in the post-bellum period with their traumatic past. Morrison ingenuously uses various symbols for the revelation of theme and development of characters. Particularly, the image of tree has its pervasive presence

and complex implication in this novel.

This involved image of tree can find its connotation in the idea of “the pain and the beauty” in African American history explored by Jean Toomer. The blacks contribute their toil and blood to this pastoral “beauty” of the American southern land, but they suffered from the “pain” of persecution and oppression; they settled on this alien land and partly regarded it as their homeland in that the ashes of their deceased ancestors who had been abducted here nourished this land, but they were still treated as the exiled. The southern land attributes its pastoral beauty largely to the beautiful

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\* Received 12 October 2007; accepted 20 January 2008

trees just as the Bible recognizes “the oasis imagery of trees and water” (Frye 142). In *Beloved*, the hell-like plantation “Sweet Home” got its ironical and illusionary name from “those beautiful trees” (Morrison 6). The exiled African American blacks have thought they could settle down in this oasis. Nevertheless, the harsh slavery reality presented by the lynched corpses hanging in the tree marred this pastoral image presented by the tree. Indeed this is one contradiction of pastoral image in African American eyes—the pastoral tree offers them salvation hope and establishes their bond with their homeland, but the harsh life under enslavement represented by the corpses of the lynched blacks always stings their eyes. Beavers view the South as a “place of origin and curse” for the characters in Morrison’s fiction (61). This thesis will be a quest of the tree’s seemingly contradictory images.

### THE “BEAUTY” AND THE TREE OF LIFE

The crystallized symbol of the tree lies in its archetypal image as the tree of life whose origin could be traced in the *Genesis*. This archetypal tree bearing the meaning of “evergreen, ever-blooming, ever-bearing” denotes the “life of cosmos”—its “consistence, growth, proliferation, the generative and regenerative process” (Cirlot 347). So the tree nourishes all life. A similar image of tree of life exists in “African’s tree-worshipping culture” (Ai 258). In their views, gods creating all the plants and animals, thus have their presence in this sanctified nature. So the Africans turn to worship the tree where they believe the spirits of gods dwell. Tree gods are widely worshipped in various parts of Africa. Most tribes worship Iroko and Baobab trees and many other tribes regard Sycamore as holy tree and they even set up altar around the tree to hymn and pray to the tree-god. A conspicuous example can be identified in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*: Nettie goes to a small village of Olinka people in Africa. The Olinka people worship a roof leaf god for they believe that their houses would be destroyed in the rainy season but for the protection of the roof leaf god. This tree worshipping culture had wormed into Africans’ blood stream and was partly transported to the New Continent by the slave trades. The black slaves in the plantations still continue to seek comforts from the trees because “the tree can communicate wishes of the afflicted” (Arnott 289). Speechless under the racial oppression, the blacks can only pin their hopes on the trees abundant in the plantation because their longings of freedom are communicated by the media of the tree to the spirits of gods dwelling there. Also like the trees in an alien land, the African blacks took roots in this tough soil, their branches extending to the sky from the snarl of agony with the inextinguishable hope to seek survival through the dark days of the slavery.

In *Beloved*, Sethe and Paul D are the only two black slaves who successfully escaped from Sweet Home. Both of them trudged through the forest in order to step on the free land. Sethe, with six-month pregnancy, had been almost whipped to death by Schoolteacher before she started her desperate odyssey. In the journey of her flight, the tree, a universal symbol of life and vigor, enlivened in the embrace of forest, offers Sethe sustaining hope to escape from this life-depriving slavery past. “Hearing the birds in the thick woods, the crunch of leaves underfoot...with the little antelope in her womb” (29), Sethe received the call of tenacious life from all around her body: the birds’ song overhead, the leaves’ crunch underfoot and the heartthrob of the unborn baby inside her womb. With no food in her stomach, fresh wounds all over her body and two swollen feet, Sethe was almost collapsed but for the appearance of a tree-like white girl—Amy Denver. Morrison consciously molds this savior-like girl to be a “tree”: her arms and legs are like “cane stalks” and her hair is “enough for five heads” (32). This image reminds the readers of a tree with thin trunk and spreading canopy. And to Sethe, Amy’s breath is like “burning wood” (78). With all these features like tree, Amy actually boasts the life-giving power embodied by the tree. In a shabby lean-to in the forest, Amy laid Sethe down in the leaves, covered her up with leaves and then massaged Sethe’s “dead feet back to life” (35). The leaves and Amy’s massage have the healing power. (In an ancient African myth, the serpent brought the healing leaves to cure a dead man.) Next day, Amy helped Sethe struggle to the bank of Ohio River where Sethe was going to give birth to her daughter Denver named after this white girl. At this moment, Sethe saw “Spores of blue fern growing... in silver-blue lines hard to see...” “They are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future.” (84) The sight of the blue fern with vitality is very inspiring to Sethe in such a dangerous situation. The spores, being the seeds of blue fern convey the hopes of a promising future for the fern; While the newborn baby is the hope for this generation of blacks. Actually the sight of these fern heralds the arrival of Stamp Paid, who transported Sethe and Denver to the free side of Ohio River.

The “beautiful trees” in Sweet Home sustained Paul D through all kinds of miseries. “The trees were inviting; things you could trust...talk to...” (21). He had lunch under the tree he called Brother. While feeding his stomach with food, he derived spiritual strength from the hope embedded in Brother, therefore the tree “replenished” him both physically and spiritually. Even when he was fastened to the irons and ropes, he still strived to have a last look at Brother, a symbol of fraternity and freedom for him and the last spark of slim hope remaining in his darkest days. Later in his days in the Chain Gang, Paul D was almost disrupted by inhuman slave labor, he drew force from the trees around his cage and compared his little love to a tree, “not like Brother—old, wide and beckoning. It was an aspen too young to call sapling and just a shoot no taller

than his waist" (221). Paul D's hope of life has been diminished to such a tiny tree because he had witnessed the ruthless destruction on his fellow blacks in Sweet Home. The only hope for life might be just as tiny as such a young seedling. He held on to the remaining hope of life until five days of breath robbing shower brought him the opening for free life. This shower sent flood-like water to the cage where they stayed. The water "made all these trees droop without wind" but failed to drench these chain Gang men. They fortunately had a narrow escape from the cage in the rain and "huddled in a corpse of redbud trees" (111). This scene reminds the readers of the Deluge. The tree corpse resembles Noah's Ark by which man kind survive the flood. Furthermore, "the Deluge itself is either a demonic image or an image of salvation" (Frye 147). It is the "sacrament of baptism" where the baptized is drowned in the old world and awakens to a new world on the opposite shore. Actually, this Deluge is the turning point of these blacks' chained lives to the free lives. The Chain Gang men escaped from the hunt of the white thanks to the flood. Later on, Paul D got advice from a Cherokee<sup>1</sup> to follow the tree flowers in order to get to the North. So he "raced from dogwood to blossoming peach, cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut and prickly pear and lastly apple trees" (112). The flight journey of this flowering trees' path permeates the novel with a smell of spring provoking the feeling of rebirth. Then feminine tenderness creeping onto his life, foreshadows his temporary self-healing in the lap of Weaver lady and his eventual meet with his beloved Sethe. Here the tree is enshrouded in the brilliance of ultimate salvation. Following the path of flowering trees, Paul D grasped Jack's beanstalk as the ladder to the heaven of freedom.

To Baby Suggs, the tree has religious significance because she leads the blacks to hold religious rituals in the Clearing, --"a wide open place cut deep into the woods nobody knew" (87). The wood seems to be the sanctuary to their rituals.<sup>2</sup> Repulsed by Christianity, the African Americans established their hybrid religion: African American Christianity. "In these secret places an alternative understanding of Christianity was born, nurtured, celebrated, and proclaimed" (Neusner 321). These repressed people chose the backwoods to be the secret church of their unique religion. Baby Suggs, the "unchurched" preacher, the spiritual leader, was molded by Morrison to be a tree: "To Denver, she smelled like bark in the day and leaves at night" (19). Baby's resemblance to the tree indicates her life boosting quality. The afflicted black folks, with their wounded bodies and hurt souls, drew regenerating force from the

tree-like Baby Suggs in the congregation of Clearing carrying religious intensity. Baby let the children sing, so "the woods rang"; she asked the men to dance, so "the ground life shuddered under their feet"; and she asked the women to cry, so the "laughing children, dancing men and crying women" (88) converged. At this moment, the wood was reverberated with their free voices and beats: The trees echo the blacks' misery by "shivery". And trees reveal the way of salvation through the voice of Baby Suggs—she asked them to love their own flesh and soul instead of God. The purifying power of the trees in the "Clearing" manifests in this cleansing ritual as its name suggests. The embittered hearts of the blacks soaked with weal and woes and soiled by the white got cleansed through their sweat and tears. This was the genuine ritual of African American religion. Even after the decease of this reverend tree-like lady, the spiritual salvation power of the trees from the "Clearing" still performed on Sethe. To survive her psychological crisis in the post-bellum days, she led Denver and Beloved to the Clearing to get soothing power. In the woods, they found the path "bright green corridor arched over with trees dropping buckeyes onto the grass below" (90) which resembled the causeway leading to holy temple for self-purgatory. Sethe's return to the woods for salvation reflects her trust to the supernatural power embedded by the trees. After her meditation in the midst of the Clearing, Sethe found that her relation with Paul D was renewed: "no matter what he told and knew, she wanted him...launch her newer, stronger life with a tender man" (99). This journey to woods injects new life into her ravaged heart. The image of "Clearing" resurfaced in the exorcism scene. "It was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves..." (261). The "Clearing" is personalized as a savior to rescue Sethe from the insidious consequences of slavery. The savior demonstrates her charming power by "heat and simmering leaves": "building voice upon voice until they found it...it broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (261). The voices of individual blacks merge, "baptize" Sethe and help her gain the power of walking out of her haunted life.

Denver's life was also haunted by the slavery residue embodied by Beloved. Her problem was quite different from her elder generations. On the one hand, Denver suffered from undergrowth physically due to the deprivation of Sethe's milk by the slavers in the slavery days and the deficiency of the food in the house wanting male bread-winner in the post-bellum days. On the other hand, Denver suffered from undergrowth mentally due to the social exclusion they received in the black community resulted by Sethe's infanticide. After her grandma Baby had died and her two brothers had fled, Denver, together with her mother, remained "the only victim" (1) of the house "full of a baby's venom". In this sense, it was hard for Denver to develop an integrated personality. Denver needed something to help her complete her stunted growth, and "Emerald Room" was the thing. Denver chose to retreat into her "emerald

<sup>1</sup> The Indian in North America believed the natural things have spirits, and especially the tree has its spirit in its shade, so the shade of great tree helps them in certain undertakings.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the relationship between the wood and the sanctuary is established in the oak-worship culture of Druids. Their old word for sanctuary is identical in origin and meaning with the Latin *nemus*, a grove or glade.

room” which refers to the boxwood bushes between the field and stream beyond 124 “hidden by post oaks, planted in a ring...stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room” (28). As its name “emerald” suggests, the room gives out green brilliance of hope. “In that bower, closed off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver’s imagination produced its own hunger and its own food...veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish”(28). Denver found shelter in this room from the “hurt” of the social exclusion and learnt to replenish her undergrowth (28) and gain a mature and integrated personality. Admittedly, this closet offers Denver a simulated experience of staying in the womb. The vice slavery deprived her right of receiving normal maternal love, so Denver could recapture this sweet experience in this womb-like “emerald room”. Similar images of tree surface in later life of Denver. When deciding to step out 124 to seek salvation, Denver saw “the buds of a sycamore tree had rained down on the roof and made the yard look as though grass grew there” (245). The buds of tree representing the hope for fresh life encouraged Denver to seek help from the black community in order to start a new life.

Sixo, Paul D’s fellow slave in Sweet Home was closely associated with the image of tree. His brotherly love with Paul D was highlighted in a blissful scene of sharing ill-cooked potatoes baked by Sixo under the tree. This scene permeated with such a strong burnt smell of potato could still impress the readers with a thick love linking these suffering black brothers. Furthermore, Sixo himself boasted the quality of tree, erecting firmly in the harsh condition. He fought courageously against his miserable slave life: he reclaimed his right by “defining” his stealing of the pig from Schoolteacher; he walked 30 miles to date a woman with time only to say good morning before he managed to rush back to Sweet Home. Then he was so tired and “he sprawled near Brother...slept through dinner like a corpse...” (21). After being caught from their flight, Sixo was burnt to death with the tree after Schoolteacher found he was too dauntless to be educated. Sixo’s undying laughter haunted the scorched trees in the flame. This brave black young man and the tree Brother merged into one. To other blacks, the trees or the forest are also the haven against danger and harm. Sixo often sneaked off at night to a place named High Tree to meet his woman secretly. Bloom and fruit of sweet love were growing in “High Tree”. Later Sixo got a plan to escape, he watched the sky, not the high part, but “the low part where it touched the trees” (197). The sky together with the tree brings him the concrete hope of new life. Also Sethe remembered that the black women in the place before Sethe went to Sweet Home made basket to hang the babies in the trees to stave the babies off the danger while they were working in the field. They also gave the babies a leaf like mint or sassafras to chew on. Paul D remembered a story of a fourteen-year-old black boy living by himself in the woods all the years. Besides, the

black in the journey of flight often “sleep in trees in the day and walk by night.” The blacks, under the color of night, hid for protection in the trees. All these brief facts indicate the blacks’ respect to the trees’ magic power.

Almost all the black characters in *Beloved* withdraw sustaining power from the tree of life to remind themselves of the “beauty” of the tree in their ravaged lives.

### THE “PAIN” AND THE TRANSGRESSION OF THE TREE OF LIFE

In *Beloved*, the law of life embedded in the tree of life is glaringly transgressed by the white slave-holders who planted the “Pain” in African American history. There is a startling picture in the novel: “The black boys’ scarred and bruised bodies were hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world” (6); The road-farers were often stunned by “the headless, feetless torso hanging in the tree”; Schoolteacher had Sixo tied onto the tree and scorched him to death. Such formidable human brutality is shown on the scaffold of the beautiful trees! These disconcerted scenes are suitable illustration for Billie Holiday’s song “Strange Fruit”: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root. Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.” The “strange fruits”, clearly the corpses of lynched blacks, reveal the whites’ unbearable sin against the law of life. In this point, the tree seems to lose its luster of life since it becomes the gallows of the blacks. The life-generating tree, here serving as life-depriving gallows, produces its strange fruits—the devastated blacks.

Since the trees are tenanted with the sacred power of life, the destruction of the trees violates the living force represented by the tree and thus is the transgression of the law of life inherent in the regenerative trees. In Celtic tradition, the grove was regarded as sanctuary, and the boughs of the trees sometimes served as pulpit.<sup>3</sup> Whoever fell on the tree would bring him disaster. In *Beloved*, chopping down the tree is also regarded as a sin. When Paul D led Sethe and Denver to the Carnival, they went through the lumberyard and smelled the “stench of dying roses” on the fence. The sawyer planted the roses long ago there in order to “take the sin out of slicing trees for a living” (47). The sawyer broke the natural law of life embedded in the tree by ending the tree’s life. Being aware of his sin, he planted the rose in the tree’s place to redeem his “sin” of chopping down

<sup>3</sup> See Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. Chapter 9 The Worship of tree: “Before the sacred tree (the center of the grove), the worshippers among the tribes of the Volga assembled and the priest offered his prayer, at its roots the victim was sacrificed, and its boughs served as a pulpit.”

the trees. The sawyer is the foil to the white slaveholders who have demolished so many lives of colored people just like cutting down the trees. So the white slavers broke graver laws of nature by wiping off the lives of their fellow human being so perfunctorily from the earth. Much worse, they took their sin, the glaring transgression of law of life, for granted. On the other hand, the tree with strange fruit symbolizes the Cross of Redemption because the tree is traditionally regarded as the "vertical arm of Cross" (Cirlot 358). Then the lynched blacks tied on the tree remind the readers of the crucified Christ on the Cross. "Christ as the universal scapegoat of human sin" (Frye 149) signifies the blacks' position as the scapegoats<sup>4</sup> of the white slavers. Christ on the Cross redeems the sin of the living, while the lynched blacks on the tree redeem the sin of the white and bring the salvation to both the whites and the suffering blacks. In the Bible, by his Fall, man was driven off the Garden of Eden and lost the blessed life depending on the tree of life, but the "tree of life are restored to redeemed mankind" (Revelation 22:1-2) eventually. Tree of life is likely restored to the redeemed blacks, so its everlasting regenerative meaning continues to function in the blacks' redeemed life.

One central plot in *Beloved* is Sethe's infanticide. Acknowledging that "ax the trunk, the limb will die" (242), Sethe regarded herself as the "trunk" and her children as the "limbs". To prevent her elder daughter from being snatched back to the dens of the slaveholders, she used a saw to cut her daughter's throat. It's a grim fact that the white slaver or the perverse slavery turns a black mother with "so thick love" into a saw to cut her own daughter's throat. Here Sethe's elder daughter is clearly compared to a broken bough or a young seedling. Especially later *Beloved*, Sethe's incarnated elder daughter, appears by the stump, which reinforces *Beloved's* image as a sawed tree. So Sethe's infanticide is obviously compared to the chopping act of the sawyer, the sinful transgression of the law of the tree. But actually it is Schoolteacher, the white slaveholder or the whole perversity of the slavery that forces Sethe to mutilate her own daughter. In the post-bellum days, Sethe, being the scapegoat, remains to redeem this transgressing sin of infanticide. Another former slave Stamp Paid once had similar transgressing experience. He, once named Joshua, had his own wife molested by their young master. When his wife returned, Joshua "decided to break her real small neck like a twig—just snap it" (233). Here his wife is compared to the twig of the tree, and he committed the sin of breaking the twig off the tree. After this transgressing act of killing his soiled wife, he changed his name to Stamp Paid to

redeem his sin. In this case, it was also the white who prompted Joshua to kill his own wife.

Another glaring evidence of the "pain" is the tree-like scar on Sethe's back. It was beautified by white girl Amy into "a chokecherry tree, trunk, branches, and even leaves, tiny, little chokecherry leaves" (16), but this tree refers to the whip scar by Schoolteacher. So this "beautiful chokecherry tree" is the glaring evidence of the brutal slavery and the transgression of the slavers against the life and freedom of the blacks. White girl Amy imagined it to be "a whole tree in bloom" and she took great passion in describing the tree: "here's the trunk----it's red and split wide open, full of sap...parting for the branches, leaves too, tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white" (79). Especially, the sap "which represent the life or inner essence of the tree...a healing portion" (Frye 148) here injects the life energy into this pattern of tree. Who can associate this tree with the hair-bristling brutality of white slaver? Anyhow, this imagination of the "tree" lent some relief to an extremely-deprived black woman facing harsh reality. Later, Amy applied spider web onto Sethe's wound and said it was like stringing a tree for Christmas. The "tree" on Sethe's back didn't resemble Christmas tree at all. Christmas tree is the symbol of brotherly love, while the tree on Sethe's back is the proof of loveless brutality of racist. The image of this delicate chokecherry tree coincides with the beautiful sycamores in *Sweet Home* because both of them embody the contradiction in the pastoral image. The tree on Sethe's back has more profound significance on the salvation of the former slaves from their scarring past.

### THE CONTINUITY BETWEEN "THE BEAUTY" AND "THE PAIN"

The "beauty" sustains the blacks through tough days, while the "pain" also contributes to their negotiations and battles with their traumatic past. Therefore there is link and continuity between these two seemingly contradicting concepts.

In the first place, this tree-like scar creates continuity between the two because as the emblem of "the Pain", the scar helps the former slaves retrieve "the Beauty" by the process of picking up the silenced memory. The scar is uniquely important to Sethe for it offers her a medium to speak out her hushed past. Sethe identified with Amy's beautification of this scar, which staved her from the traumatic memory of slavery temporarily. With the elapse of time, the scar became "lifeless in her back like a washboard" and too numb for her to feel the gentle touch of a man. Sethe couldn't see the lifeless scar on her back, so if not for the communication with Paul D sparked off by the topic of scar, her long-time deliberate forgetfulness would draw her into the abyss of slavery past after the temporary relief passed. After Paul D undressed her and asked her about the story of the scar,

<sup>4</sup> The "scapegoat" idea comes from Sir James G. Frazer. In his view, the ancient tribes offer the sacrifice to the deity as their scapegoat to achieve the atonement thought necessary for spiritual rebirth. In the modern times, the majority, the male, the adult or the white to regard the minority, the female, the child or the black to be their scapegoat bearing their wrongs of the past for the expiation.

this “tree” on her back opened a rift on her present haunted life to expose her past miseries. When she wept after telling him about the stolen milk, Paul D “behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, held her breasts in the palms of his hands” (17). Stunned by this glaring scar and the story behind it, Paul D began to hold her breasts to relieve her burden as a mother who was struggling in the twin torrential of slavery past and murder guilt. Sethe’s nurturing power as a mother was restored and her burden as an unfulfilled mother was relieved. Because of the “tree” on her back, Sethe won the sympathy of her lover and started her odyssey of digging up the hushed potent memory.

Also this tree-like scar encourages Paul D to express his profound compassion sealed in his “rusty tobacco iron box”: In his eyes, the scar was a “decorative work of an iron smith too passionate for display”. This black woman’s inextinguishable desire for life is too “passionate” to display. Paul D regarded Sethe as too “passionate” which was against his principle of not loving too much, but the passion was contagious—Paul D “rubbed his cheek on her back and learnt that way her sorrow the roots of it” (17). When Paul D touched the “ridge and leaf” with his mouth, the gentle touch, like dew into withered leaves of tree, injected the life to the “tree” and he himself felt peace in mind. Tree, formerly as a proof of whites’ atrocity, here serves as the source of production, nurturing the bud of new life with its animated power by a fellow sufferer. After their first physical union, Paul D stayed in 124. Their relations went through ups and downs with the disturbance of Beloved. Whenever there is reconciliation between them, image of trees will appear: When Sethe returned from her journey to the Clearing, her relation with Paul D seemed renewed. Later, When Paul D wanted to tell Sethe about Beloved’s manipulation over him, he blurted out his wish for Sethe to bear a baby with him and Sethe was moved, so they joyfully embraced each other. Paul D looked at “the black trees lining the roadside, their defending arms raised against attack” (129). Sethe and Paul D not only had physical unity, but also at this time united spiritually to “defend against the attack” from Beloved and the prey of the past embodied by Beloved. After Beloved was exorcised, Paul D returned to Sethe’s bedside and found that Sethe’s life had been devastated by Beloved: Sethe had fixed eyes and expressionless face but “her hair, like the dark delicate roots of good plants, spreads and curves on the pillow” (271). Her life was left barren after all these demolition of slavery and after-slavery robbery embodied by Beloved. She was like a withered plant deprived of life, but in Paul D’s mind, she remained a “good plant” because her root was still “dark and delicate”. It well suggested that Paul D would most likely join Sethe’s life and water this withering plant to her new life with his refreshed love. The tree-like scar, though as the strange fruit of the tree conveying some contradiction (the proof of the whites brutality and the burden of the slavery past), still highlights the regenerative force of the tree in that the scar initiated the

communication of these former slaves with each other and with their hushed past.

In the second place, the continuity between “the beauty” and “the pain” is reflected in Beloved’s foil to tree. Beloved was firstly presented as a spiteful ghost haunting Sethe’s house, then as a demanding and sensuous young girl and eventually as a vampire-like woman feeding on Sethe’s physical body, the readers might reject her as a vicious character representing the gripping past from which Sethe desired to escape. In this sense, Beloved is regarded as the evil fruit of slavery which is exactly “the pain” persisting in former slavers’ life in the post-bellum days, but her foil to the tree makes the re-memory of the former slavers possible, thus “the beauty” in slaves’ life is recreated. Beloved’s foil to the tree is explored as follows.

For one thing, Beloved represents the tree of history. “Anything that can grow, flourish, bear fruit and die might be likened to a tree: a person, a family, a nation, a cultural tradition” (Ferber, 219). In Egyptian and Nordic mythology, the tree is named “the World Tree” associated with an image of “three worlds”. The World Tree or Yggdrasil of the *Eddas* is the giant ash tree that links and shelters all the “three worlds”: “the underworld (the hell), the middle world (the earth) and the upper world (the heaven)” (Ciriot 348). The three worlds are represented by three parts of the World Tree - branches, trunk and roots. Clearly, with the roots buried underground, the trunk on the earth and the branches stretching toward the heaven, the tree connects the “three worlds”. Since the tree builds the communication between the three dimensions in space, it ushers in the communication between the three dimensions in time (the past, the present and the future). The dimensions in space are parallel to the dimensions in time. That’s to say, the past is buried underworld like the root of the tree; the present is on the earth like the trunk of the tree; the future glitters toward the afterlife like the branches in the tree pointing directly to the heaven. So the growth of a tree can reflect a person as well as a nation’s continuity from the past to present and then to future.

The function of tree of history is mirrored by the corresponding figure in this novel—Beloved whose image is like the tree of “three worlds” creates the unity of the past, present and future of black life. To be exact, Beloved’s positive significance emerges from her image as a revived stump. Beloved was associated with the tree stump at the moment of her appearance at 124: When Paul D, Sethe and Beloved returned from the Carnival, they found at a stump near their door sat Beloved in wet clothes. At this moment, this stump, as the mutilated part of the tree, recollected the appalling memory of Sethe’s infanticide years before: Sethe, in order to save her own children from the claw of slavery, using the saw, cut the throat of her elder daughter like chopping down a young seedling. Thus Beloved’s foil to the mutilated stump is instantly established. And it should be noted that if Beloved were alive, she would fulfill her growth as a tree trunk, springing from the root

of her mother and continuously shooting out branches, leaves, blossoms and bearing the fruits. In this sense, being the media of root and fruits, Beloved can connect the destiny of her mother and the future generation if she remains alive. But as a matter of fact, due to the devastating slavery, she was cut down and all the growth halted. So the blacks' historical continuity was destructed symbolically just like Beloved as a link between the past generation and the future generation was demolished. Nevertheless, Beloved returned to life. As a revived stump, she picked up her role to connect the fate of her mother with the future generation and almost changed all the lives of the characters in this novel. The depiction of Beloved's first appearance in the book abounds with meanings: She walked out of the water, "gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree...make her way through the woods past a giant temple of boxwood" (50). Cleansed her past mutilated mishap by the water, Beloved regained strength by her stay against "a mulberry tree" and then trudged through "a giant temple of boxwood". This short journey with baptism and pilgrimage intimation highlights Beloved's renewed historical and religious role.

Beloved's image as revived stump provokes the image of "the tree of Jesse" in the Bible: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his root a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him---the Spirit of wisdom and so understanding..." [Isaiah (11:1)] So Beloved's new life can be deemed as this "fruitful Branch" from "the tree of Jesse". By all means, the regenerative "tree of Jesse" re-emphasizes Beloved's connecting function which has been discussed: the regenerative "Branch" springs from the ravaged stump and "will bear fruit" to extend Sethe's life into the future generation.

From the above discussion, it is safe to conclude that Beloved's images as a revived stump and a branch from "Tree of Jesse" bring about somewhat blessed implication in that her arrival restarts the re-memory process of the blacks in 124. Beloved's inquisitiveness prompts Sethe to touch her past memory—she seemed to know a lot about Sethe's past, such as Sethe's "diamond" earring, Sethe's lullaby, Sethe's own mother, etc. On the other hand, Sethe and Denver's common attachment to Beloved drew close the mother and her daughter whose relation had been estranged by the infanticide and the arrival of Paul D. Besides, Beloved's sexual intercourse with Paul D prized open his rusty "tobacco box" sealing his past memories, which prompted Paul to face his own past and then he went to find Sethe for resolution. As for Denver, she either rejected to hear stories of Sweet Home from Sethe (she only enjoyed the part about her own birth) or escaped from the past memory which she failed to understand (she suddenly lost her hearing at a boy's question about Sethe's infanticide). Beloved's arrival motivated Denver to contact with outside world. Seen from the above examples, Beloved reconnects the relation

between Sethe and her own mother who almost fell out of her memory; also Beloved temporarily mended Sethe's relation with Denver. Therefore, Beloved basically serves as an important media between Sethe with her older generation and her younger generation. This historical continuity was underscored in the skating scene. When Sethe, Beloved and Denver were skating on the ice pond in the woods, they took delight in their stumble on the ice. The description of the trees' image highlights the union of these three women. "The live oak and soughing pine on the banks enclosed them and absorbed their laughter..." (174). These embracing trees seem to build for these three women an exclusive world fending all the dangers outside. Clearly, in this trio, Sethe embodies the present life of the black, Beloved the past memories, Denver the future life. In this point of intersection on the ice, the blacks' past, present and future are harmonized. Actually, Beloved is the symbolic mender of this historical continuity in this smooth skating act. In another relevant scene, the metaphorical sap of tree works. Denver was described by Sethe as "a charmed girl". She had a special affinity with the haunting spirit and later Beloved in human form. That's because Sethe put "a bloody nipple into the baby's mouth" right after her crime of murdering that girl. The milk and blood (which could be deemed as the sap of the tree of Beloved) create the connection between the Beloved, Sethe and Denver. The last scene comes from Sethe's shared exclusive life with Beloved and Denver after she has lost her job. In this female space, encouraged by Beloved, Sethe recalled her own mother, then Beloved's voice merged with Sethe's mother's voice and this merged voice changed into omniscient voice to recall the ordeal in Middle passage. In this way, Morrison blends the interactive blacks' fates and their personal identity to concoct the collective identity of African American.

Beloved is also a foil to the god of tree—Dionysus. This foil has its first touch in the earlier plot of her "shining": "Women did what strawberry plants did before they shot out their thin vines: the quality of the green changed. Then the vine threads came, then the buds. By the time the white petals died and the mint-colored berry poked out, the leaf shine was gilded tight and waxy" (64). Here, the shining Beloved was depicted as a fruit-bred plant enwound with "thin vines", the symbol of Dionysus<sup>5</sup>. The second conspicuous foil appears in the exorcism scene: When the singing women of the community came to exorcize Beloved, they saw Beloved in the shape of a pregnant woman. The description of Beloved—"Vines of hair twisted all over her head...Her smile was dazzling" (261). Beloved's image quite resembles the image of Dionysus, "called Dendrites, tree God, and is even represented

<sup>5</sup> Ivy is always associated with Dionysus's fate: Ivy saved him from Zeus's lightning before he was born; the tendrils of ivy and vine encircled the mast of pirate ship abducting the baby god; he turned to vine stock to escape from the hounded nymph.

with branches springing from his chest” (Brunel 298). Dionysus, “is crowned with a wreath of ivy or vine leaves or by a pine cone...the god himself came to be associated primarily with vine and wine” (Brunel 306). Then Beloved’s “vines of hair” is a reminder of this god. The third evidence is that Dionysus is a “twice-born god” (Brunel 298): in Greek Myth, luring the baby Dionysus away by the toy, Titan killed him and dismembered him before boiling the pieces in the pot. They ate all the pieces but left over Dionysus’s heart, by which Athena revived this young god.<sup>6</sup> In this point, Dionysus’s revival is “symbolic of annual process of renewal undergone by plants”. (Brunel 310) Then Sethe’s belief of Beloved as the incarnation of Sethe’s mutilated daughter associates her with this revived tree god Dionysus. Besides, from his life story, the baby Dionysus, unlike the child of other god possessing magic power such as Hercules, appears to be a fragile and defenseless creature. When he grew up, he turned to revenge with the most appalling force and cruelty. Beloved was similar to him because she was also a fragile child before the infanticide and she was transformed to a revenging ghost and incarnated into a girl with magic power “picking up the rocker with one hand” (56).

With these resemblances with Dionysus, Beloved possesses one important feature of this god: Dionysus was a “god of metamorphoses, the indefinable” (Brunel 298) because he was good at transforming his physical body to stave off the fatal attack. Beloved is also capable of metamorphoses: She was originally the “crawl already” girl; After the infanticide, she became the spiteful ghost haunting 124; Then she returned in the living form of a young woman after Paul D drove this ghost out of 124; Once in the Clearing, she turned to strangling and at the same time caressing hands to deal with Sethe; Afterwards, she disappeared in the lightless shed; Preying upon Sethe, she became a vampire-like figure who was fat and pregnant; Eventually, she vanished into the creek. Her changing forms in these plots reflect her fluid identity: no one can say for sure which single person Beloved represents, while she appears to have experienced all the victimization on the black slaves: Sethe believed Beloved to be her incarnated girl and she had enough evidence<sup>7</sup>; but at the same time, Beloved might also be a survived girl in “Middle Passage”<sup>8</sup>; Beloved might also be a girl like

Ella who had escaped from whites’ brutal confinement. This metamorphosis feature is essential for the blacks to stave off the insidious effect of racism for all sides and Beloved’s complicated identity from her metamorphoses turns her to be a hybrid embodying so many suffering black women. At this point, Beloved merges the destiny of generations of the black slaves into a fluid identity in one person. Beloved’s Dionysus-like metamorphosis begets her one fluid identity creating the historical continuity from Sethe’s mother to Sethe and to her daughter. After the exorcism scene, Beloved vanished, leaving footprints down by the stream behind 124. A boy aired his witness of Beloved’s trace into the creek. Ella guessed her “hiding in the trees waiting for another chance (263). It was most likely that Beloved walked back to water where she had come. Her departure reminds the readers of the prevailing ritual in Russia. The Thursday after Whitsunday, the Russians chop down a young pine in the wood, dress it as a woman and bring it into the village. Three days after the Trinity Sunday, they drag it out and throw it into the water, which brings an end to this ritual. They regard this young pine as “both a scapegoat bearing the wrongs of the past year and an expiatory victim offered to the new year” (Brunel 307). Also with her great resemblance to Dionysus, Beloved serves to some extent as the “scapegoat” of the past because she suffered from the devastated slavery system and remained restless in her afterlife. The community drove her away and she retreated into the water. The blacks offered her as “expiatory victim” to herald in blessed new life. In another word, Beloved was the sacrifice in the blacks’ altar of rebuilding their connection with their unappeased past.

All in all, Beloved seemingly as insidious residue of slavery—“the pain” of southern scene inherently represents the re-found “the beauty”—the former blacks’ rebuilt bonds with the pastoral land and long-standing history by her foil to the revived tree stump and metamorphosing tree god Dionysus.

## CONCLUSION

Actually all the images of the trees in *Beloved* can be chained together to reflect the pastoral “beauty” in the south: the beautiful trees in “Sweet Home”, trees in Sethe’s flight journey, Paul D’s flowering path, Baby Suggs’ Clearing and Denver’s “Emerald Room”... The regenerative power of the tree assists the black slaves to gain physical flight from the slavery and the former slaves from the psychological grip of the slavery past. The “strange fruit” of the southern trees, the “Chokecherry tree” in Sethe’s back and Beloved’s perverse personality reveal “the pain” in blacks’ life

So Beloved talked about her experience in the dark hold of the “Middle Passage” boat and this image later on appeared in her monologue

<sup>6</sup> There is another birth story of Dionysus: According to Greek mythology, Zeus appeared with his thunder and lightening to the mortal Semele, six-month pregnant with the baby Dionysus, and killed her. So Zeus pulled the fetus from its mother’s womb and enclosed it in his thigh and let it go three months later.

<sup>7</sup> Sethe’s breakwater, Beloved’s age, her baby-like skin, smell, sleepiness, her indulgence on sweet food, her scar on the neck and the scratch on the forehead, her knowledge about Sethe’s lullaby, “diamond” earrings and Sethe’s mother

<sup>8</sup> When Denver and Beloved went to fetch the wine in the shed, Beloved disappeared in the darkness, and then Denver found Beloved lying on the floor like a curled up baby in the womb.



under the claw of slavery or slavery residue. The law of life embedded in the tree is transgressed by the vicious slavery. Nevertheless, the positive significance of the tree-like scar and the tree of history represented by Beloved highlights the archetypal meaning of the tree in the quest of Afro-Americans and combines the “beauty”

and the “pain” together. Beloved’s foil to the tree-god Dionysus and her metamorphosis emphasize this bond. Therefore, all the archetypal images of the trees in *Beloved* merge to reflect the common endeavor of the blacks to create the historical bond with their past, thus retrieve the lost “beauty” in the southern pastoral scene.

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