



## Analysis on the Growth of Blacks in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

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### Abstract

Morrison’s novel *Beloved* takes readers to the period before and after the American Civil War, and leads readers to deeply experience the sufferings of American black slaves under slavery, especially the tragic fate of black female slaves, and the sufferings of liberated slaves from torture and struggling with the trauma caused by slavery after the Civil War, when slavery was abolished. This paper explores the growth of the main characters in the novel, and comes to a conclusion that only when the black people could bravely face the history and the reality, can they find their selves, retrieve self-esteem, and rebuild national self-confidence.

**Key words:** *Beloved*; Sethe; Paul D; Salvation

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### INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) is one of the greatest black female writers in the United States. In her life, she had written 11 novels from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *God Help Children* (2015). As a black writer, her works show the plight and struggle of black people in different historical stages with superb creative skills; at the same time, as a woman, she uses profound and delicate depiction in her

works to describe the blood and tears of black women. Morrison’s novel *Beloved* takes readers to the period before and after the American Civil War, and leads readers to deeply experience the sufferings of American black slaves under slavery, especially the tragic fate of black female slaves, and the sufferings of liberated slaves from torture and struggling with the trauma caused by slavery after the Civil War, when slavery was abolished. The author of this paper believes that in *Beloved*, Morrison integrates all the sufferings of the heroine Sethe during the slavery period into an illusory image of the character Beloved. The arrival of Beloved brings back the painful memory of Sethe, Paul D and Denver. The departure of Beloved implies that the black people should “bravely face the history and the past, face the individual and collective physical, mental, and psychological trauma brought about by slavery, reconstruct their own identities, and reconstruct the subjectivity of the self and the group.” (Meng, p.114)

### 1. SETHE’S STRUGGLING WITH THE MENTAL TORMENT AFTER KILLING HER DAUGHTER

Sethe is originally a slave girl at Sweet Home in Kentucky. Under the management of Mr. Garner, the slaves of Sweet Home are relatively lucky. Mr. Garner agrees to Halle’s request for redeeming his mother Baby Suggs’s freedom, and sends freed Baby to Cincinnati and helps her find a place to live. Sethe, who replaces Baby, could choose her desirable husband by herself and get the permission of the Garners to marry Halle. After Sethe and Halle get married, they give birth to two sons and a daughter. The slaves at Sweet Home live a relatively happy life when Mr. Garner is alive, but they are tortured since Mr. Garner dies and Schoolteacher takes over Sweet Home. Schoolteacher seems to be a cultured man, but in fact is a very stubborn defender of slavery. He changes

Mr. Garner's mild management and imposes tyrannical control on the slaves. The slaves of Sweet Home then plan to flee. Sethe is pregnant at that time, and takes the risk to send off her three children. She continues to stay at Sweet Home to look for her husband Halle. Paul D is caught, Sixo is burned to death, and Paul A is hanged. Sethe is abused by the two nephews of Schoolteacher and then brutally beaten. Halle breaks down and disappears when witnessing his wife Sethe is abused. The slaves of Sweet Home pay a terrible price for fleeing.

Sethe flees to Baby's house in Cincinnati to reunite with her children, where she has twenty-eight days of non-slave life which might be the happiest days in her life. The life with freedom is very different from the life at Sweet Home, where Sethe and her children are slaves without dignity. In Cincinnati, the family members love each other and get on well with the neighborhood. Sethe, who has tasted freedom, would never allow her children to return to Sweet Home and continue to be slaves, would never allow her children to live the infernal life without dignity and suffer from humiliation. Therefore, when Schoolteacher appears near 124, the only thought running through Sethe's mind is that her children could by no means be caught back by Schoolteacher. Sethe plans to kill the children and herself, so that no one could hurt them. When Schoolteacher and the slave hunters rush into the wooden shed, Sethe has already cut the little daughter's throat with a saw, and the tragedy happens.

In terms of humanity, Sethe's brutal behavior violates the ethical norms of motherhood, but Sethe's heartfelt love for the children prevents readers from equating her with the murderer who picks up the saw and kills her daughter. When the incident happens, the slavery is still in play in the south of the United States. Slave owners have the ownership of slaves, as well as slaves' offspring. They can buy and sell slaves, and they have the right to hunt back the runaway slaves. At Sweet Home, Mrs. Garner is kind in the slaves' eyes, but Paul F does not escape the fate of being sold by her to pay off her debts. "In the eyes of white slave owners, black people are just animals that could speak enslaved by them, and they are machines that could make huge profits for them." (Nie, p.55) Sethe is very clear about the consequences of the runaway slave being caught back by the owner. What happens to Paul D, Paul F, Paul A, and Sixo would be the fate of her and the children if they were caught back to Sweet Home, and what awaits them would be torture and separation of mother and children. This is also the tragic experience of Baby, Sethe's mother and thousands of black female slaves. Under slavery, slave owners regard female slaves as free reproduction tools, sell the children they give birth to, and even rent out their sex to other farms. Baby's eight children have six different fathers, and they are sold after birth, only the youngest son, Halle, is left. "What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received

upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children." (Morrison, p.23) Sethe's mother is repeatedly raped; she throws away all the children she has given birth to, with Sethe the only one left. Sethe's deepest impression of her mother is the slap her mother gives her. In order for Sethe to recognize her after her death, the mother asks Sethe to remember the mark on her body. The young Sethe also wants to bear that mark on body, for which she is slapped by her mother. Later Sethe understands that the mark is the evidence of the identity as slaves, and it is the mark that brings them all disasters and all shame. The blacks with the mark do not even have the most basic right to survive. Their lives are controlled by slave owners. While Sethe is waiting for more maternal love, her mother is hanged. It can be seen that slavery is sinful, and is the root of all evils and the reason why Sethe risks her life in order not to return to Sweet Home.

Under slavery, if the runaway slave is found by the slave owner, he or she would be caught back by the slave owner, and would be punished as an escaped criminal. When Schoolteacher appears, Sethe chooses to die, because she might as well die as be enslaved at Sweet Home once again if she has to make a choice. The cruel slavery forces Sethe to kill her most precious daughter. Sethe has always believed that she is doing the right thing, and that she does it from a sincere love for her children, and she would never like to see her children be turned into slaves again and live a life of darkness like animals. Sethe's murder of her daughter prevents the attempt to be caught back by Schoolteacher, but she could not escape the mental torture caused by the heavy guilt of killing her beloved daughter by herself. This mental torture is not relieved due to the abolition of slavery, but becomes so intense that Sethe has a mental illness and loses herself. This kind of life is also a torment for Sethe, if it weren't for the other children, she really wants to lie down in the grave with her dead daughter. It can be seen that slavery not only brings physical and mental torture to black slaves, but also causes eternal trauma to the liberated blacks.

Sethe is a tragic character. She has had a happy life, but it is a flash in the pan. In those twenty-eight happy days, Sethe wins herself with the help of the family and the neighborhood. But as the tragedy happens, Sethe is burdened by a heavy mental shackle and caught in the whirlpool of mental torture. The tragedy is the memory that Sethe deliberately forgets, and a scar that she doesn't want to uncover. In her subconscious mind, Sethe believes that the indifference of the neighbors has contributed to the tragedy to a certain extent. When the group of slave hunters enter the city, there is no one to inform them, and when the tragedy happens, there is a group of black people who look on outside the house. After the tragedy, people look at Sethe with strange eyes, and keep far away from 124. The once lively 124 is now an isolated

and deserted haunted house on Bluestone Road. "She (Sethe) returned their disapproval with the potent pride of the mistreated." (Morrison, p.96) Sethe shuts herself off, no longer communicates with her neighbors, no longer greets anyone of them, no longer trusts anyone, and thus is isolated from the outside world. Sethe's pride and thorns are in turn condemned by the people in the city. The confrontation between 124 and the community shows that Sethe has separated from the black community and fights against the torture of fate on her own. This actually pushes Sethe into a more lonely and helpless situation, and intensifies Sethe's mental illness. With the arrival of *Beloved*, Sethe's memory is gradually brought back. When Paul D leaves, only *Beloved* is left in Sethe's world. Sethe is entangled with *Beloved*, indulging in painful memories, unable to extricate herself from mental torture. *Beloved* uncovers the most painful scar in Sethe's memory. Sethe repeatedly explains to *Beloved*, seeking her forgiveness, but the memory is deeply engraved in her mind, and she couldn't get rid of it. As memories continue to accumulate, Sethe suffers from more and more torture, and eventually suffers from a mental illness of losing herself. Baby once admonishes Sethe: "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield." (Morrison, p.86). Baby knows very well that the tragic fate of black slaves is caused by the white ruling class, by the evil slavery system, and they are all victims. Black slaves gain freedom with the abolition of slavery, but if the liberated blacks are not brave enough to face the history, are not able to face the reality, and do not love themselves, they will fall into the abyss of pain and cannot find their selves, as it is said in the novel, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another." (Morrison, p.95)

At the end of the novel, Sethe mistakes Mr. Baldwin for Schoolteacher. At this time, Sethe does not escape by hurting herself and her children, but intends to take up the ice pick to kill the "Schoolteacher". The people in the community save Sethe by stopping her in time, which to a certain extent indicates that the relationship between the community and Sethe has eased. *Beloved* is not only the physical incarnation of the daughter who is killed by Sethe, but also the incarnation of all the sufferings imposed on the blacks during the slavery period. Just as Sethe is stuck in the torment after she kills her daughter, and could not extricate herself, the liberated slaves are also stuck in the memories of past sufferings and could not recover from them. The people in the community work together to drive away *Beloved*, which indicates that only when the black people are united can they be truly redeemed. With the help of the community and the care of Paul D, Sethe is expected to extricate herself from mental shackles, walk out of the abyss of pain, and find her self.

## 2. PAUL D'S SELF-SALVATION AFTER THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

Paul D is the last man at Sweet Home, a man who could rescue Sethe from the whirlpool of mental torture, and bring her happiness. Sethe decides to follow Baby's words, "Her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt, she placed one by one on a bank," (Morrison, p.86) decides to choose "trust and rememory (Morrison, p.99)", and decides to start a new life with Paul D. But when Paul D sees the news that once makes a sensation in the city, he leaves without saying goodbye. It seems that Sethe is no longer the woman he knows, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four." (Morrison, p.165) Paul D's accusation deeply hurts Sethe, because he also lists her characteristics on the animal side, just as Schoolteacher defines her at Sweet Home. The question about how many feet brings an end to the future of Sethe and Paul D, and pushes Sethe back into the whirlpool.

Sethe and Paul D used to work as slaves in the same farm, and they share a common experience. The common memory makes them feel closer to each other. However, the sufferings of once being a slave make them afraid to face the past and unwilling to uncover the scars in the past. This becomes a wall that lies between them and an obstacle to their happiness. When he is a slave, Paul D is tortured, and his self-esteem is severely trampled on by the dog's life. After the Civil War, liberated Paul D still wanders around, staying in one place for no more than three months, and lacks extremely the sense of security. These are sequelae of the tragic slave life. When Paul D and Sethe meet again after escaping from Sweet Home, slavery has long been abolished, but Paul D still seals up his memories and shame as a slave, and does not want to make himself, especially Sethe, see his weakness. He puts those painful memories "one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open (Morrison, p.113)". Paul D comes to 124 and enters Sethe's life, thinking that he is strong enough to protect and take care of Sethe. When *Beloved* arrives, Paul D is full of guard against her, always trying to drive her away, which means that Paul D intends to deliberately forget his past. He refuses to approach *Beloved*, but he couldn't stand her temptation. "She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it." (Morrison, p.117) This implies that although Paul D deliberately does not mention the past, he couldn't resist his curiosity about what happens to Sethe. The news of Sethe's killing her daughter breaks Paul D down and once again he sees his weakness. He loves Sethe deeply, but he is not strong enough to bear everything about her, so he chooses to escape. "His tobacco tin, blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey." (Morrison, p.218)

The memories of the past flood with the opening of the tobacco tin. Paul D recalls that when Mr. Garner used to brag to other farm owners that his black slaves are men when he is at Sweet Home, he gladly accepts this beautiful lie. "The rule of white slave owners over blacks is not only embodied in the enslavement and persecution of blacks, but also in instilling into blacks the ethical consciousness that they are born as slaves. The purpose is to construct the ethics that blacks accept the fate of being enslaved and are willing to be slaves to the white people." (Nie, p.55) Now, he can't help but question whether it is a reward from Mr. Garner or he really possesses manhood. The opened tobacco tin shows him his weakness. Recalling the past shame, the fate of being sold, and the dog's life, Paul D gradually wakes up from Mr. Garner's beautiful lie. Whether Sweet Home is under the gentle management of Mr. Garner or under the tyrannical rule of Schoolteacher, their identity as slaves could not be changed, and rights and freedom belong only to the white people. The root of all the sufferings of black slaves is the sinful slavery system, and Sethe is one of the victims.

Sethe is the savior of Paul D. In the days when Paul D lives with Sethe, on the surface Paul D is caring for and protecting Sethe, but actually, it is Sethe who is healing Paul D. For 18 years, Paul D has been wandering around. He does not have the idea of being settled until he meets Sethe. As the love between the two grows, Paul D decides to spend the rest of his life with Sethe and create a better life together with Sethe. Only Sethe can make him feel at ease, because Sethe gives him the sense of security that he lacks most. "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order." (Morrison, p.272)

Paul D is able to face his weakness, realizing that slavery is the real culprit of their tragedies, realizing Sethe's preciousness, and returning to Sethe to take care of her, which indicates that Paul D is truly strong enough to face the past and the reality, and finally wins his self in the end.

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### 3. DENVER'S RECOVERY FROM THE TRAUMA CAUSED BY SLAVERY

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Sethe's daughter Denver has been with Sethe, and her sons Howard and Buglar run away from home because they claim that they couldn't bear the ghost in the house. Actually the two sons couldn't accept the fact that their mother is the murderer of their sister. Howard and Buglar have never come back since they run away from home. There is no word from them, and Sethe does not know whether they are alive or not. The mother and the two sons are alienated, being separated for many years. Denver is the only child left at home. She used to go to school as happily as other children, but after understanding what happens to her mother, she could not get out of the door,

and sometimes goes to stay in the boxwood alone and takes refuge there. On one hand, Denver loves her mother; on the other hand, she is full of fear for her mother. She has always been afraid that the right reason for which Sethe has to kill her daughter will appear again, and she often dreams of the gruesome scene of her mother cutting off her head. This is the tragedy caused by the history to black families, and the trauma caused by the slavery to black offspring. However, Howard and Buglar's escaping from home, and Denver's self-closing also reflect their own fragility. They just flee blindly, escape the reality, do not dare to face the outside world, thus are selfish, narrow-minded, without courage and responsibility.

As the offspring of slaves, the daughter Denver and the sons Howard and Buglar live during the American Civil War and after the abolition of slavery. After the tragedy conducted by Sethe, the rest three of the children are not caught and returned to Sweet Home in the South as slaves, so they have never experienced the sufferings of being a slave, and they cannot understand their mother's killing of her daughter. Denver is full of curiosity about her mother's past, and eager to know what is the right reason that forces her mother to kill her daughter. Only Beloved can help solve her doubt, so the arrival of Beloved makes Denver secretly happy. Denver takes good care of Beloved and tries to protect her, but she still can't step into Beloved's heart, because Beloved only belongs to Sethe. But through Beloved, Denver has more understanding of the sufferings her mother undergoes when she is a slave in the past. The more hardships her mother has undergone Denver feels, the more Denver could understand her mother's fear of slavery and her helplessness under slavery, and the clearer Denver could make her mother's true love for the children. The more Denver understands her mother, the more she loves her mother. In the end, Denver's love for her mother outweighs the fear of the outside world. When Denver sees that her mother is being tortured by Beloved, she bravely steps out of the house, goes into the community for help from the neighbors, and assumes the responsibility of raising the family in order to save her mother, thus she "wins her self with a sense of responsibility". (Meng, p.114)

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### CONCLUSION

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The history of the black people under slavery is a history of blood and tears. As Baby says in the novel, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief." (Morrison, p.5) Slavery not only brings physical and spiritual torture to black people, but also causes profound trauma to black people and even the entire black nation. After the abolition of slavery, black slaves gain freedom, but this is not enough. The black people should also emancipate their spirits and realize self-salvation on the basis of emancipating their bodies,

otherwise they will be trapped in the abyss of pain, and utter a helpless cry like Paul D, "How much is a nigger supposed to take?" (Morrison, p.235) To achieve self-salvation, the black people should have the courage to recognize the history and face the reality in order to find their true selves. More importantly, the black people should completely break the enslavement and rule of whites over blacks, retrieve self-esteem, and rebuild national self-confidence.

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