



HAL
open science

The Mad Trio in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Michel Bernard

► **To cite this version:**

Michel Bernard. The Mad Trio in Toni Morrison's Beloved. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1994, CAPES Curriculum and Other Essays, 07, pp.41-52. hal-02350348

HAL Id: hal-02350348

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02350348>

Submitted on 6 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

*The Mad Trio in Toni Morrison's *Beloved**

Michel Bernard

Université Française du Pacifique ¹

*Beloved*² is a story of love and desire in which the past closely combines with distress, misery and physical pain. All the characters are haunted by memories which overwhelm their attitudes and relations with others up to distraction, as is the case with Sethe. The story is conducted to a psychotic breaking-point so that madness seems to be the ultimate issue given to some of the characters. But how does this gradual process towards madness, with its dramatic intensity to release pent-up emotions, function in the text, and to what extent is it linked up with the prevailing, significant motifs of the narrative?



Because the past is too painful, Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid hold it back as though recollection was likely to reopen deep, old wounds. Sethe, like Baby Suggs, has the stamina of those whose lives are torn apart and beaten

¹. Université Française du Pacifique, B. P. 6570, Faaa-Tahiti, (Polynésie Française).

². Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, Pan Books, 1987). All quotations are from this edition.

down; she is one of those who are deeply hurt and despite their distress still find the energy to go on living, "keeping the past at bay" (42). Likewise, because the past embodies unbearable suffering both in mind and body, Paul D has "shut down a generous portion of his head" and confines himself within the routine of daily life with its trivial gestures of survival (41). Yet, when he finds himself in the presence of Sethe, he is urged to recollect his past whose fragments help shape the pattern of the narrative. When he sees Sethe again, the closed portion of his mind opens "like a greased lock" (41). And likewise Sethe's past ebbs up to the surface of her conscious mind when it is released by love and desire: "Emotions sped to the surface in his company" (39). Nevertheless, Sethe keeps to herself "things she wouldn't tell; things she halfway told" (38). As a matter of fact, recapturing the past in Paul D's presence also means to come to terms with "her terrible memory" (6) which comprises the murder of her baby Beloved with a handsaw. Talking about the past may bring about a word that triggers the intolerable recollection with its load of guilt. This is precisely what happens when Sethe says her mother was "hung" like a mere criminal (61). She stands up suddenly, walks over to a chair, lifts a sheet and stretches it as wide as her arms can go. She folds, refolds and doublefolds it and then takes another one:

She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind. (61)

In order to keep safe from any intolerable admission of truth she goes through an obsessive ritual which is a means to protect herself from the unacceptable. Further on, when Paul D shows her a newspaper clipping about her, she starts wheeling about the room and circles around the subject "without getting to the main part," that is, "the answer to the question Paul D had not asked outright, but which lay in the clipping he showed her" (161). Circling is the mode of defense in which she confines herself in order not to acknowledge the repressed truth. Moreover, as the past cannot be admitted by her conscious mind, it finds its expression in another symptom of the hysteric kind: in the Clearing, when she has a nightmare, she feels as if she were strangled by someone; she tumbles forward from her seat onto the rock, clawing at hands that were not hers. Beloved and Denver rescue her and point at the bruises on their mother's neck as though someone had really tried to strangle her (96). The marks on her skin are the expression of the unconscious forcing its way through the defense which Sethe endeavors to set up. Because the unacceptable truth is banished from her speech it surfaces on her skin: her body speaks.

A kindred reaction is to be found when Nelson Lord asks Denver "the question about her mother," which awakens something that "leapt up inside her" because it was already lying deep in her mind (102). As a result, Denver never returns to school and she becomes deaf to the outside world — the world of learning, exchange and speech. Her body expresses what she refuses to admit into her conscious mind. When she asks the same question to her mother, "her hearing is cut off by an answer she could not bear to hear" because it questions her own birth and identity. She prefers to withdraw from everything else but the baby ghost: "She went deaf rather than hear the answer . . . Denver kept watch for the baby and withdrew from everything else" (105). She, then, focuses on the baby ghost within a mental space she has shut off from the world. In other words, the imaginary presence of the ghost becomes a substitute for the inadmissible answer. Instead of being persecuted in body by the past, Sethe and Denver decide to call forth the ghost that has been trying them on (4). Two years later, indeed, her hearing is "cut on by the sound of her dead sister trying to climb the stairs" (103-04). The noise of the baby climbing up the stairs is a way to admit the unspeakable by denying the baby's death. The unconscious, then, surfaces in the shape of a ghost. The sounds of the world outside the house are replaced by the noise of the baby inside. The two women are thus shut up in the grave-like enclosure of a fantasy: "as soon as I got the gravestone in place you made your presence known in the house" (183). From that time onwards there is "a shift in the fortunes of the people of 124" (104); the two boys, Buglar and Howard, leave home and Baby Suggs dies as if the ghost had driven away all the inmates of the house except Sethe and her daughter. But the hysteric and obsessive symptoms were only a first step towards madness as if the only possible way to bear the past was to go crazy: "Other people went crazy, why couldn't she?" (70).

Just as Denver goes deaf rather than hear the truth about her mother, Sethe shuts herself up in her fantasy in order to secure the safety she feels threatened by the outside world (164). Sethe encloses herself within a duplicate of Sweet Home, "a wonderful lie," a "cradle" which is also a duplicate of Denver's bower "closed off from the hurt of the hurt world," that is, a fantasy house (28, 219). At the same time, she locks up her memory in order to secure herself from the irretrievable injury lying deep in her mind like the very scar that marks Beloved's neck. Because the past is "unspeakable" (58), because Sethe's guilt still haunts her like an ever-bleeding wound, the dead baby is eventually resurrected "in the flesh," that is, in the real. Beloved's body is returned to her "just like it never went away, never needed a headstone" (198). Hence, the defense of Sethe's ego is broken as soon as she sees Beloved's figure sitting on the stump. She urinates

considerably as if her waters broke again and she re-enacted the delivery of Denver (Beloved) in a canoe eighteen years ago: "The minute I saw you sitting on the stump, it broke" (202). The flow of her unconscious surfaces irrepressibly; it invades her consciousness and overflows all the bounds of her own being. As a result, mother and daughter are enclosed in the same prison-house similar to a mental space ruled by the imaginary. It is not surprising, then, that Denver regards the house "as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits" (29). This space is a mental space engrossed by Beloved's overwhelming presence. The house is a metaphor for Sethe's haunted mind in which Denver is her twin sister — "it occurred to [Sethe] that the two were alike as sisters" (99). Just as Denver's silence is "too solid for penetration" (103), Sethe too leaves "no entry," "no crack or crevice available" (188), in order not to be exposed to the interference of the exterior, which would cause the ruin of her fantasy. The division between mind and body is thereby abolished, and Sethe encloses herself within an imaginary world into which she ensnares her own daughter. Mother and daughter are literally imprisoned in 124 which makes up for the whole universe — a house "peopled with the activity of the dead" (29). But who is "this girl Beloved, homeless and without people?" (66). She is different from all those wandering "Negroes" Paul D knew, and he is paralyzed by her presence since he cannot throw her out or keep control over his sexual urge (66, 264). But who told her about 124, about Sethe's earrings? Where did she get those shoes and dress? "In the dark my name is Beloved" (75), she says. Beloved comes from nowhere "on her own free will" (200); she embodies the return of the repressed, hence Sethe knows nothing about her (99). She is a representation of the unfathomable abyss of the unconscious and the figure conceived of is a fantasy, a fiction:

But what if the girl was not a girl, but something in disguise? A lowdown, something that looked like a sweet young girl and fucking her or not was not the point. (127)

She causes Denver to experience the abyss of non-identity. To be looked at was, indeed, like "breaking through her own skin to a place where hunger hadn't been discovered" (118) — the "original hunger" as the impossible source of desire. Beloved is the "shining" guise of desire; she has no identity but that of the unconscious which is non-contradictory and boundless. That is why Sethe knows nothing about her just as she is unaware of the fatal alienation she develops with her. As a figure of desire, Beloved casts a spell on Sethe, Denver and Paul D (128). She stands in-between night and day, inside and outside; she is a fading

figure standing on the demarcation line between appearance and disappearance, appearance and reality:

Easy as walking into a room. A magical appearance on a stump, the face wiped out by sunlight, and a magical disappearance in a shed, eating alive by the dark. (123)

The boundaries break down for she cannot fit in a polarized structure. "She has no self" and there is no world outside for her (123); she is part and parcel of the house as a fantasy and can assume multiple identities. As a fictional mirror-self, *Beloved* reflects both Denver and Sethe. In other words, *Beloved* is the presence that meets their respective desires. The three women are concerned by a mirror relationship which places each one in the gaze of the other. Moreover, Denver was fed with *Beloved*'s blood that covered Sethe's breast just after the murder (152). Sethe "traded the living for the dead . . . so Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (152). For Denver, *Beloved* is that other self whose identity is combined with the question of her origin. That is why her birth is a real puzzle to her; it is an enigma to which she wants no answer because she already knows it although she holds it back. This answer lies in the outside world against which she builds up the enclosing walls of her safety — "her secret house" (205). Yet, her desire to know shifts on *Beloved*'s longing to hear stories about the past: "At such times it seemed to be *Beloved* who needed something — wanted something" (118). But it is the same speech, the same story as her mother's — "scraps her mother and grandmother had told her." Therefore, talking about her mother's past is a means to talk about herself and find an answer to the question about her birth in an imaginary, therefore acceptable, world. Denver stands in a narcissistic relationship with her sister. And *Beloved*'s "downright craving to know" (77) is an incentive to her desire: there is an abyssal want she tries to fulfil and *Beloved* embodies the possibility to meet her own desire. Denver's dialogue with *Beloved* is a monologue with death; Denver is glued to her mirror image which reflects the image of her dead sister. The two echoing chapters in the end of part II open with an all-pervasive phrase — "I am *Beloved* and she is mine" — and bear evidence of this narcissistic relationship involving the three terms of a trio. Sethe and her two daughters are mirrors which are set up in such a way as the images they reflect eventually join together and become blurred. The result is the undecidability of a construction in which each figure is the reflection of the other. It is as if only one raving subject occupied the whole stage of the fantasy. Each term drifts into the other and is lost indefinitely in the mirror-play of the narrative.

Denver subjects only her "outside self" (207) to her mother's desire in order to avoid total destruction of her entire personality (207). To put it differently, the relationship Denver-Beloved incarnates Denver's split personality, the outer self being subservient to her mother's desire. Beloved is, then, part of Denver's personality as another self: ever since Denver was little, her dead sister has been in her mind. But basically, the trio holds on to the Sethe-Denver relationship in which Beloved intervenes as a support for the strategies of desire. In her fantasy, Sethe summons up the figure of a being which is only a projection of her own self and a possession used by unrestricted desire: "her face is my own" (210). Sethe's craving for safety incites her to break up with Paul D instead of the ghost because Paul D confronts her with the reality of her past (96). At least, with the ghost, she can beat and cope with everything (97). All that Sethe wants is to go alone with her daughter in a haunted house where she manages "every damn thing" (97). She does not want to "develop some permanent craziness" like some other "Negroes" (97). Yet she soon plunges into psychosis when "the click" occurs and she lays "it all down, sword and shield" (174) in a definite refusal of the future as a repetition of the past for her progeny.

But Beloved comes back home "from the timeless place" (182) — from the Other place (the unconscious) — and her presence abolishes the boundaries of time. The house floats in "timeless time" and space is no longer bounded by the separation between the inside and the outside worlds: "the world is in this room;" "there is no world outside my door" (183-84). 124 is the counterpart of Sweet Home. It is a place sheltered from reality just "like Sweet Home where time didn't pass" (244). Similarly, there is no limit between past and future because in order to hold back the past Sethe precludes all possibility of the future: "her brain was not interested in the future" (70). Now past and future are defined in relation to the present. But because the present has been superseded by the past, the future can no longer be defined in relation to the present. In other words, the present fails to play its role that consists in dividing the past from the future. Therefore the present is an everlasting, overpowering present so that Sethe lives in a static time, a "no-time" (191) equivalent to death: "it is always now, there will never be a time" (210). In such time, life is dead as it used to be when Paul D was in the convict camp (109). As a matter of fact, Sethe is entombed in her fantasy: her house is being buried under snow which solidifies itself while "the peace of winter stars seemed permanent" (176).

Only Paul D has the power to break the duality of the relation between mother and child in taking the place of the ghost: "It took a man, Paul D, to shout it off, beat it off and take its place for himself" (104). If Paul D remains at 124, the ghost has no room left. Moreover, his presence enables Sethe to recapture her past so that she can find again her place in a three-dimensional time. A third space must be inserted into the mother-child couple and break the lethal narcissistic bond that keeps the mad trio going. Paul D stands for that moment of rupture which is denied by the two women so that they can act on in their imaginary scenario.

Denver expected her father, but the voice she heard downstairs was instead that of Paul D who came for her mother (207). Paul D's "loud male voice" (37) imposes the law of reality which first Denver then Sethe deny in order to go on with their fantasy. As a surrogate father, Paul D is expelled from Denver's imaginary sphere so that she occupies her mother's place in the relationship that joins her up with her dream father — "an angel man" (207) — and Beloved — "Me, him and Beloved" (209). But, in the strategies of her desire, she plays the double game of attraction and repulsion. Since Denver uses Beloved as a mirror with which to construct her own illusory identity, Beloved's seduction of Paul D unveils an incestuous desire fulfilled by proxy in defiance of the prohibition of incest. Yet, it is Paul D who bears the consequence of the transgression and decides to leave 124.

Paul D has to leave because his presence confronts Denver with the actuality of her father's death which she cannot admit. He is a kill-joy who interferes in the mad game. As a matter of fact, his interference compels Denver to face the flat, drab reality of the real world (39). His presence has messed everything and spoilt "the safety of the ghost's company" (37). As a result, she goes on playing her mother's game and the three women gradually band together and lock themselves up in Sethe's fantasy in which reality has no rule; the house thus becomes the enclosure where they can arrange their imaginary scenario "to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds" (199).

Furthermore, an incident will hasten Sethe's plunging into madness. It occurs when Paul D reminds her that she is not an animal because she has two feet and therefore must know the difference between right and wrong. In other words, Paul D is the man whose word has the power of law; he underscores the unbreachable chasm between man and animal. The paternal and social law marks out divisions, draws limits and maintains the demarcation between the inside and the outside worlds (182-83). On the one hand, there is Sethe's imaginary space —

the house — , on the other hand, there is Paul D's symbolic space, that is, the living world of regulations, money, exchange and language. But the damage he did came undone "with the miraculous resurrection of Beloved" (105) in defiance of the symbolic law. A third space should be inserted into the mother-child couple. But Paul D fails to do be the intervening agent and, as a result, Beloved rules the house. When Sethe tries to assert herself and be "the unquestioned mother whose word was law," Beloved slams things, wipes the table clean of plates, throws salt on the floor and breaks a window pane. She does not belong to the symbolic world and refuses to abide by the law that enjoins to "honor thy mother and father" (242).



Sethe is enthralled by Beloved's image from which she cannot turn away, although Denver has a foreboding of the threat it represents for her mother. In Sethe's enclosure love is unrestricted, exclusive, "too thick" like butter in the churn-house of Sweet Home; the two women are glued to Beloved's presence. Sethe's relationship with Beloved is "loaded with desire" and Beloved confronts Sethe with non-mediated need: the longing she sees in Beloved's eyes is bottomless and Beloved keeps inventing desire in order to support their self-destructive kinship. The story of the past is the only medium that feeds "her thirst for hearing" and Denver nurses Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure is to "overfeed the loved" (83). Their relationship does not involve any intermediate agent but the past on which they feed, that is, the very narrative where they are shut up like in a tomb — Beloved. Sethe is thereby both mother and daughter in the realm of her fantasy. "Whatever was happening, it only worked with three — not two" (243), but in that case, the third term is a ghost — "Us three," that is, Sethe-Denver-(Beloved) or Sethe-Beloved-(Denver) since all the terms of the trio are interchangeable.

The regressive process initiated with Beloved's presence reaches a point of no return. The border-lines between body and soul, matter and spirit, word and thing are abolished. Such gradual metamorphosis is due to the fact that the passage from matter to spirit has become possible. The great divide between words and things is bridged by fantasy so that speech is replaced by devouring hunger and insatiable thirst. Both women live in mutual exhaustion: Beloved is stultified, gluttoned, cloyed and drowsy with food. Sethe is nothing but a living skeleton, "a rag doll" (243) in Beloved's hands.

Because the difference between need and desire is effaced in Sethe's fantasy, Sethe and Beloved are "locked in a love that wore everybody out" (243). Because being has been replaced by having language no longer makes sense; it is an oral, obsessive expression of possession. In the roaring noise that prevails in 124, Stamp Paid can "cipher but one word" — mine (181). The stories told and heard are like food that fills in an ever-opened mouth. Because need implies immediate satisfaction, it is not thrown upon the axis of time; unlike need that is animal-like, desire involves a distance between subject and object together with incompleteness. But Sethe's boundless, unrestricted love excludes all recognition of the other. As love and desire are mistaken for thirst and hunger, they involve immediate satisfaction like any primeval need (58). There is no deviation of need through demand in words that would unlock love and leave something to be desired, that is, a certain lack, the impossible plenitude that constitutes all subjects. Now this lack is constantly being completed without any distance between subject and object. To put it differently, desire is fulfilled in the mode of need. That is why hunger and thirst are substitutes for love. Now, food has replaced words: their relationship is couched in terms of greed — Beloved was "greedy . . . to hear Sethe talk" (63). "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes" and, further on, she is "lapping" Sethe's devotion "like cream" (57, 243). Sethe is thus devoured by Beloved and Beloved becomes Sethe.

Beloved eats up Sethe's life, swells up with it and grows taller on it (250). Denver becomes aware that her mother is literally drawn into the abyss to fall to her death. Sethe is trading her own life for Beloved, which is a way of redeeming herself. In an endless process, she is trying to make up for the murder and Beloved is making her pay for it. Consequently, Beloved lives in the enclosing gaze of her mother who, in turn, is devoured up by her daughter's demands. Beloved dresses in Sethe's clothes, imitates Sethe's way of talking and walking so that it is then "difficult for Denver to tell who was who" in the carnival re-enacted by the two women "beribboned" and "decked-out" (241, 43). In the fatal game of fantasy, identities are blurred. Sethe plays with Beloved as if she were a doll whose hair she keeps braiding, puffing, tying and oiling. Just as the function of carnival is to overturn normality, so too Sethe's fantasy gives vent to madness which disrupts all clear-cut positions in the symbolic. The three women of 124 could have been candidates to the lunatic asylum in Cincinnati (250).

As a mirror image, Beloved embodies Sethe's alienation. The third space that must be inserted into the mother-child couple is occupied by fiction. Therefore mother and child cannot refer to the dimension of the symbolic which is figured by the father's place. Sethe *is* Beloved. All her truth lies in a ghost — a

shadow, a dream. She is protected and alienated in her reflection that at once reveals and abolishes her own existence in sameness. Beloved, indeed, has "two dreams: exploding and being swallowed" (133-34). She fears disintegration, self-splitting when she loses a tooth, as if her body was on the verge of losing its integrity. It needs another person to keep her body from falling apart and Sethe is the support of an imaginary self-image (134). Hence, Sethe is equally threatened by this impending self-destruction although she is not aware of it.

The death wish implied in the mirror relationship is foreshadowed by the scene in which both Denver and Beloved stare at each other's faces joined together in the water of the stream (101). Denver accuses Beloved of trying to choke Sethe in the Clearing as if the irrepressible attraction by her own narcissistic reflection was indeed virtual death. She then realizes the danger of such a situation in which Beloved threatens Sethe with starvation and suffocation. She grows aware of the lethal power of her ghost sister and it takes all her resilience and determination to rescue her mother from madness.

Denver realizes that her deafness set up the bulwarks of a silent playground where Beloved and she could indulge freely in each other's gazes beyond the words of speech. Until now, it was for fun, but the game is over. She has so far assumed her identity in only a playful way, not in earnest. She realizes that "her outside" self has been superseded by Beloved so that she is now a stranger for her mother. This outer self no longer protects her inner, real self. She feels her own estrangement as if the very integrity of her body were threatened: "She cut my head off every night . . . Her pretty eyes looking at me like I was a stranger" (206). Denver dreams she becomes a doll in the hands of her mother who cuts her head off and combs her hair. Her dream echoes Sethe's unrestricted devotion for Beloved, when she realizes that "it was as though her mother had lost her mind." As soon as Sethe sees Beloved's scar, "the two of them cut Denver out of the games" — "the cooking games, the sewing games, the hair and dressing games. Games her mother loved so well she took to going to work later and later each day" until she is dismissed by her employer in the restaurant where she worked. All Sethe's attention is then focused on Beloved's scar which epitomizes her guilt. But now it becomes clear that Sethe and Beloved are "only interested in each other." Therefore Denver begins "to drift from the play" in which her mother is in danger (239-40).

Confronted with her mother's madness which she is now fully aware of, Denver realizes that the machinery set in motion by the two women works too well, and they may end up killing one another. She realizes Sethe shuts herself from society in the darkness of her enclosure which is a way of going back into

the time when her daughter was in her belly. As a result, *Beloved* feeds on Sethe who is now threatened by impending death. Sethe's fantasy is the ultimate refusal of subservience to slavery and its aftermath. But it reaches a point of rupture which entails Denver's own refusal of being smothered with lack of air and mobility. Denver, then, reverses the sense of her protection — protecting *Beloved* from Sethe — and makes the decision to protect her mother from *Beloved*, that is, to break the fatal bond. Denver's attitude towards the prison-house changes entirely. The young girl develops a desire to leave 124, to escape its confines, even to escape the garden. So she decides to "step off the edge of the world," leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help because she knows it only works with three, not two. She is now fully aware of Sethe's crime and is scared of her too thick love: "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters" (205). She thus makes the decision to leave her mother's tomb and step into life. She assumes that her love for Sethe implies a separation from her, that is, the death of her other self and thereby a new birth into the world. She decides to be born again, in Spring time, which is the season of renewal (243). Denver dies in the figural sense of losing her identity — her imaginary self in her mother's womb. She accepts her own loss, and gives herself a symbolic identity. She assumes the identity assigned to her in the world outside — Halle's daughter — with the possibility of death in space and time. And to be heard being called "baby" by Lady Jones "inaugurates her life in the world of a woman" (248). Once in the street, she recovers her landmarks by choosing between right and left, and she joins up the community of people who decide to rescue Sethe from her predicament. Ella is the one who knows that the past cannot take possession of the present and disrupt social order. Her voice is the voice of the community for which every day is "a test and a trial" (256). Sethe, however, performs the ultimate act of madness against Mr Bodwin, even though he is an abolitionist. The fact is that Mr Bodwin is the owner of 124 where his past is buried together with Sethe's memories. In other words, his past as a white man is part and parcel of the world which Sethe refuses in shutting herself up in madness. He is responsible for the intolerable memory that supports the fantasy house. Significantly, it is he whom Sethe nearly stabs in the final, climactic scene. Further on, it will take Paul D to bring Sethe back to life once *Beloved* has vanished. He goes back to 124 — "the house of a very tall child" — in order to unlock time, "that time didn't stay put." He and Sethe, whose lives are governed by the past, "need some kind of tomorrow" (273). It is the condition required to regain her identity.

The lack of outline and the blurring of clear-cut distinction between the inside and the outside worlds produce fearful effects in the text by rendering borderlines imperceptible. Madness is a device that serves to efface the borders between reality and fiction, figural and literal. The undecidability of *Beloved's* identity helps to create uncanny effects akin to the fantastic. Hence the reader's state of uncertainty whether the events are to be explained by reference to natural or supernatural causes. Was it an earthquake or the ghost that shook the house? To what extent is *Beloved's* presence rooted in actuality? Who speaks in the last chapters of part II? What happened to Halle? Who is the girl running from the stream in the last chapter? Toni Morrison blurs the limits between elements ambiguous and thus unlocatable in the real. Scanty pieces of plausible explanations add nothing but an irresolute feeling of perplexity. Impositions of meaning take place, then, in such a provisional and tentative way that, as the novel progresses, they serve to create the backdrop of a pervasive absence of stable meaning. The narrative, no longer a result derived from an external source, becomes the source that itself creates the reality supposedly imitated.

Moreover, the hesitation between the past and the present brings back all events to the present as "timeless time." Therefore, the historical references about slavery, the details about the lives of the Blacks before and after the Civil War, the suffering, agonies and misery that weigh so much upon their memories are eternalized and pervade the reader's mind. Recollections accumulate in the present and give a permanent, vivid mark to the past. Precise details of life past in *Sweet Home*, for instance, help to give the impression of an authentic historical background. The undecidability introduced by the text is thus much more efficient than a plain account about slavery. The story builds towards its climax through extreme sensations, so that when the crucial moment comes, the reader's own senses are in a state of heightened, sympathetic awareness. The imaginary world of the narrative seems real through vivid, physical details fraught with emotional intensity. That is why, once the book is closed, it echoes in us like a poem: "*Beloved.*"

