The Individual and the Community in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Geneviève Laigle

To cite this version:

Geneviève Laigle. The Individual and the Community in Toni Morrison's Beloved. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1994, CAPES Curriculum and Other Essays, 07, pp.19-32. hal-02350352

HAL Id: hal-02350352

https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02350352v1

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 Individual and the Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Geneviève Laigle
Université de La Réunion [1]

Beloved [2] is set in 1873 in Cincinnati with a number of flash-backs focussing on the tragic events which took place in 1855 at Sweet Home, a farm in Kentucky, then at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati. Sethe and Paul D, the main protagonists, are former slaves; and so are nearly all the black characters in the novel. Whereas the few Whites who play a part in the story are generally viewed from the outside, the black protagonists are seen, so to speak, from the inside and much attention is given to their thoughts, feelings and memories.

Toni Morrison being herself Afro-American, her picture of black characters and of their relationship with the black community may be assumed to be particularly perceptive and illuminating. It should therefore be rewarding to take a closer look at the picture which *Beloved* gives of the black community and of the part it played in the lives of individuals whose traumatic memories of pre-Civil War times were still very close and vivid. Was the community tightly linked, or did people shift for themselves in the midst of general indifference? Was it possible for Blacks who had deliberately cut themselves off from the community or had, for some reason, been rejected by their neighbours, to preserve their

---

[1]. Université de La Réunion, Faculté des Lettres & Sciences Humaines, 15 avenue René Cassin, B. P. 7151, 97715 Saint-Denis Messag Cedex 9 (France).
[2]. All quotes from *Beloved* are from the Picador edition published 1988 by Pan Books, London, in association with Chatto & Windus.

equilibrium and achieve self-fulfilment or were they irremediably doomed to psychological unbalance for the rest of their lives?

Karla F. C. Holloway, a black critic, remarks that whereas Whites tend to think of groups of people in terms of society, Blacks tend, even nowadays, to think of "something closer to clan than it is to society."[3] The notion of community, which keeps recurring in *Beloved* as it did in Morrison's previous novels, suggests a typically African organization, "more linked, more deeply unified than a society," which sociologists have called the "extended family." "It united not simply two people, but two families with a network of extended kin who had considerable responsibility for its development and well being."[4]

The slave system practised in the Southern states before the Civil War threatened this network with disruption. Selling slaves like cattle or any other kind of property resulted in black families whose members were scattered all over the country and had hardly any means of keeping in touch with one another since most of them could neither read nor write. Sethe, for instance, has lost track of her relatives. She does not even know whether she was born in Carolina or Louisiana and only remembers her mother "as one among many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field" (30). Sethe's mother merely nursed her two or three weeks, then "went back in rice" (60) so that by the time the baby woke up in the morning she was already in line. When she came back from work in the evening it was dark, and on Sundays she slept "like a stick" and was too exhausted to take care of her daughter. Thus, Sethe knows nothing about her mother except that she had come "from the sea," spoke the language of her mysterious native land, and was hanged one day for obscure reasons.

Baby Suggs' family offers a characteristic example of the disruption of black families originating in the slave system. Unlike Sethe who had "the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage" to the man "who had fathered every one of her children" (23), Baby Suggs had several husbands and her eight children six fathers, for "men and women were moved around like checkers" (23). When Baby Suggs gave birth to her eighth and last baby, she barely glanced at it for she had come to the conclusion that

---

[3]. Karla F. C. Holloway, "Response to *Sula*: Acknowledgment of Womanself," in *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), p. 71.

[4]. Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall, 1968), p. 39.

> it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own — fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. (139)

When Baby Suggs, bought out of slavery by her youngest son, arrived in Cincinnati in 1850 and discovered the taste of freedom, she dreamt of gathering her whole family around her. But it did not take her long to realize that her dream had no chance of ever coming true, for tracing her children involved long and difficult investigations which, in some cases, might even jeopardize the child's life:

> See who took Patty and Rosa Lee. Somebody name Dunn got Ardelia and went West, she heard. No point in trying for Tyree or John. They cut thirty years ago and, if she searched too hard and they were hiding, finding them would do them more harm than good. Nancy and Famous died in a ship off the Virginia coast before it set sail for Savannah. That much she knew. (143)

Like Baby Suggs' children, Paul D and two of his half-brothers were taken away from their mother at an early age. Paul D never saw his father and was too young when Garner bought him to be able to remember his mother (219). When he happens to meet in Maryland four families of slaves who have been together for a hundred years: "great-grands, grands, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, children" (219), he watches them both with awe and envy for they remind him that his two half-brothers had been all his family.

The ties between those who remain together are perhaps all the stronger for being constantly threatened with disruption. After Paul F has been sold, Paul D cannot bring himself to run away from Sweet Home without his last half-brother. At the moment when he is caught, he was thinking of retracing his steps to look for his half-brother instead of making for the corn where a Negro woman was waiting for the fugitives (225).

Ties between the Blacks who live on the same plantation are sometimes as strong as those between close relatives. To have the same skin-colour and share the same life creates bonds almost as powerful as those of the blood. Sixo and Halle are not related to the Pauls by the blood but, being Sweet Home men like them, form the siblings' "extended family."

The notion of a bond between members of a group appears clearly in the story of Paul D's escape from the camp in Alfred, Georgia, which can be understood as a parable illustrating the idea that community comes before self and is basic to self. After nine days of solid rain which have made work impossible, the forty-six prisoners, chained together, are locked in their boxes under ground level. When the ditch caves in and mud comes up to their thighs, the men realize that they will soon get drowned. Diving through the mud under the bars is their only means of escape. But the chain that held them "would save all or none" (110), the narrator comments. Should one single prisoner be lost, then all would perish. In this extreme situation, the survival of each individual depends on how the other members of the community behave.

Like Hi Man, who assumed responsibility for his fellow inmates in the camp at Alfred, some characters play an important part in the black community of Cincinnati and feel responsible for others. More often than not they are men or women whose lives have been wrecked in one way or other by the Whites, and who find it their duty to help the Blacks in their struggle for freedom. Stamp Paid is one of these people whom life has handled roughly: he was compelled to lend his wife, Vashti, to his master's son, and though he felt like killing him swallowed his anger and pride. But when the young white boy was through with Vashti, Stamp Paid could not get over his resentment and take his wife back. From then on he lost all interest in a life which brought him no satisfaction. Only one path to salvation was open to him: turn towards other people and help them "pay out and off whatever they owed in misery" (185) "Beaten runaways? He ferried them and rendered them paid for; gave them their own bill of sale, so to speak" (185). Stamp Paid took Ella across the Ohio into free territory; he also ferried Sethe's children, and some time later Sethe herself after she had run away from Sweet Home. By assuming this role of Providence for the runaway slaves, Stamp Paid becomes a key member in the community and his life acquires a meaning. In other words, by saving others he also saves himself. Instead of nursing his bitterness in a solitary house, Stamp Paid helps others and is rewarded of his pains by the warm welcome he receives in every house where coloured people live.

Ella too has been ill-treated by life. "Her puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called 'the lowest yet.' It was 'the lowest yet' who gave her a disgust for sex" (256), and her experience of the atrocities perpetrated by the Whites led her to consider love as "a serious disa-

bility" (256). Like Stamp Paid, Ella helps runaway slaves towards freedom, thus bringing her contribution to the defence of the black community against the white oppressors. Every single member of this community is known to her, which is the reason why Stamp Paid comes to inquire from her when, looking in the window of Sethe's house, he sees a young woman he cannot identify. That Ella has become an authority among the black community is also evidenced by the fact that, in the last pages of the novel, it is she who convinces the other women that they must "get down to business" (257) and rescue the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road.

Unlike Stamp Paid and Ella, Lady Jones does not seem to have been victimized by life. She was even lucky enough to be picked for a coloured girls' normal school in Pennsylvania. But what made her luck was also a cause of suffering to her for in her heart she believed that "except for her husband, the whole world (including her children) despised her" (247) on account of her light skin, gray eyes and yellow woolly hair. Lady Jones might well, like Macon Dead in *Song of Solomon*, have opted for the values of the Whites, married a light-skinned man, and given birth to almost white children whose offspring could easily have passed for Whites after a few generations. Instead of doing so she had married the blackest man she could find, and chosen to side with her black brethren whose children she gathered in her little parlour and taught to spell and count, an occupation which white people thought "unnecessary if not illegal" (102). Through her educational role, Lady Jones succeeded in achieving some sort of spiritual balance and her action was beneficial both to herself and to the black community.

It is when she realizes what part she can play in the community that Baby Suggs discovers a meaning to her life. The sixty-year old woman who arrived in the free state of Ohio in 1850 had lived the life of a slave since she was born and it had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue" (87) at the same time as it had deprived her of her identity. Before her arrival at Cincinnati, "sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home" (140).

> Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. (140)

Breathing the air of a free state amounted for Baby Suggs to a discovery of the self which had remained unknown to her for some sixty-odd years. The old worn out woman suddenly became aware that her hands belonged to her; she perceived a knocking in her chest and realized that her heart had been there all along. Having nothing left but this great heart, she decided to open it "to those who could use it" (87). By devoting her time and her love to the black community, Baby Suggs achieved a kind of self-fulfilment she would never have known otherwise. Helping others, she no longer felt like some cast off object that nobody needs. 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, the narrator tells us, became "a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. . . . Messages were left there for whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day soon" (86).

The symbolism of the door open to any stranger who may come by and the uniting value of food shared with others are among Toni Morrison's characteristic themes. Pilate's or Eva's households (*Song of Solomon* and *Sula* respectively) are similarly built on openness to outsiders, and *Beloved* itself provides the reader with several instances in which food takes on a quasi religious significance. When Stamp Paid puts into the mouth of the three-week-old Denver one of the black-berries he has gathered, a berry which tastes "like church" (136), he unwittingly acts like the priest who, giving communion to his congregation, thereby unites isolated individuals into a closely knit community of believers. The smoking-hot piece of fried eel which Stamp Paid gives Sethe before taking her across the Ohio (90) or the two baked sweet potatoes which Ella brings to the young woman who eats them "in quiet celebration" (92) are also fraught with symbolic overtones. They are indeed nourishment for the body, but even more importantly, they mark Sethe's admission into the black community of Cincinnati.

With one single exception that will be mentioned a little further on, every time people prepare, offer, accept or share food the connotation is one of union. When Sethe realizes that she wants Paul D in her life, she immediately thinks of the supper she will cook for him, "her offering" (100), the tangible sign that Paul is welcome in her house. Sethe, who needs to give as well as to receive love, is constantly associated with bread and milk. "She had milk enough for all" (100), the narrator comments.

By eating a piece of Ella's head cheese before taking leave of her, Stamp Paid means to show his old friend that he harbours no ill feelings towards her although they have just had a heated discussion (188). As for the food which

Denver receives throughout the Spring for her mother and for herself (249), it signifies that she is no longer rejected by her neighbours and has been reintegrated into the community.

But only unsophisticated, simple food, offered without ostentation, unites people. The feast given by Baby Suggs to celebrate her grandchildren's and daughter-in-law's escape from a slave plantation to a free state far from illustrating the associative value of food points to the risks which the individual runs by exposing himself to the censure of the community. The three or four pies initially made with the blackberries brought by Stamp Paid insidiously grow to a feast for ninety people with hens, turkeys, roasted rabbits, perch and catfish, ice cakes and corn puddings. "124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? . . . it made them mad. Loaves and fishes were His power--they did not belong to an ex-slave" (137). The black community are made furious by "the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124" (137). Without being aware of it, Baby Suggs has aroused her neighbours' anger, jealousy and ill feelings. The following day, the perceptive old woman sniffing in the air a sharp smell of disapproval suddenly realizes that this "free-floating repulsion" (138) does not come from whitefolks but from coloured ones. "And then she knew. Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (138).

This feast, closely followed by "the Misery," that is to say Sethe's killing of her baby girl and attempted slaying of her other children, marks the beginning of Baby Suggs' estrangement from the community. The old woman collapses and her vacant eyes testify that she has been "knocked clean of interest" (178). Sixty years of slavery had not succeeded in breaking her spirit, but the rejection of her people destroyed her almost overnight. As Stamp Paid realizes some eighteen years later:

> to belong to a community of other free Negroes — to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed — and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance — well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy. (177)

Once she feels cut off from the community and believes that the Whites have won, Baby Suggs gives up preaching in the Clearing as she used to do every Saturday afternoon when warm weather came. Despite Stamp Paid's exhortations

not to quit, she no longer speaks the Word and goes to bed to concentrate on the colours of things. Had she received the support of the community, she would probably not have withdrawn into herself and sunk into utter indifference to the world.

In Sethe's case, the severing of bonds with the community seems to be deliberate. If we are to believe Ella, it was not so much Sethe's killing of her baby girl as her contemptuous attitude towards her neighbours and acquaintances which caused people to turn their backs upon her. Sethe's crime was indeed "staggering", but the Blacks who had known slavery could understand the desperate murderous urge which had seized her on realizing that her children, whose freedom she had struggled to secure, would be caught and brought back to Sweet Home to be slaves for the rest of their lives. What a woman like Ella cannot forgive is not the murder of a baby (she herself had refused to nurse the "hairy white thing" (258) fathered by "the lowest yet"), but Sethe's reaction to it which she considers to have been "prideful" and "misdirected" (256). "When she got out of jail and made no gesture toward anybody, and lived as though she were alone, Ella junked her and wouldn't give her the time of day" (256). Instead of turning to the community for help, Sethe chose to restrict her world to her children and her mother-in-law and the result of this severing of bonds was devastating not only for herself but also for Baby Suggs and for her three remaining children.

When Baby Suggs died, ten years after the Misery, Sethe could have availed herself of the old woman's funeral to make her peace with the community. But once more her aloofness — or what was interpreted as such — offended the mourners. Here are Stamp Paid's recollections of the silent war which opposed Sethe to the community on the day when Baby Suggs was buried:

> The setting-up was held in the yard because nobody besides himself would enter 124 — an injury Sethe answered with another by refusing to attend the service Reverend Pike presided over. She went instead to the gravesite, whose silence she competed with as she stood there not joining in the hymns the others sang with all their hearts. The insult spawned another by the mourners: back in the yard of 124, they ate the food they brought and did not touch Sethe's, who did not touch theirs and forbade Denver to. . . . Just about everybody in town was longing for Sethe to come on difficult times. Her outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency seemed to demand it. (171)

Thus an event which might have healed the breach between Sethe and the community turns out to be "a dance of pride, fear, condemnation and spite" (171) and Sethe's world remains restricted to Denver and herself. Sethe only leaves her

house to go to work at Sawyer's; apart from the people she meets there she has no contact with anyone; nobody ever comes to visit her at 124 and she never calls on anyone. When Paul D unexpectedly arrives at 124, Sethe's whole life revolves around Denver and the ghost of her dead daughter that has been haunting the house for eighteen years.

After Paul D's departure, having lost the man who for a few months had acted as a link between herself and the world, Sethe gradually sinks into neurosis devoting all her love and attention to Beloved, her dead daughter come back to her from "the timeless place" (182). Apart from this daughter reclaimed from the dead nothing matters: "Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be" (183).

When Sethe loses her job at Sawyer's through her own fault, the last flimsy link which connected her to the world outside 124 vanishes and the poor woman, broken down by the very excess of her motherly love, becomes "like a rag doll" (243), indifferent to what the next day might bring. Separation from the community has let the door open to psychic disturbances which might have been otherwise avoided.

When Sethe chooses to cut herself off from the community she unavoidably condemns her daughter Denver to live in utter seclusion. After her brothers left 124, and Baby Suggs died, Denver's loneliness is such that she nearly rejoices of the company of her dead sister's ghost. When Paul D arrives at 124, Denver, who is eighteen, has not left the house since the time when, aged seven, she went for almost a whole year to Lady Jones' to learn to spell and count in the company of her peers. Living in utter seclusion with her mother has made the girl entirely dependent on her and frightened of the outside world. Paul D's irruption into the female world of 124 brings to light the neurotic nature of Denver's relationship with Sethe. Paul D is regarded by the girl as an intruder who has come to rob her of her mother's love. Sensing the attraction between Sethe and Paul D, the eighteen year-old girl behaves like a baby removed from its mother's arms and starts crying, shaking and sobbing. "I can't live here," the poor girl hardly manages to utter, "Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either" (14).

Once Paul D has rid 124 of its "venomous" ghost, Denver can do nothing but retire to her "emerald closet" (a bower formed by five boxwood bushes planted in a ring) "lonely as a mountain . . . thinking everybody had somebody but her; thinking even a ghost's company was denied her" (104). Isolation threatens

her spiritual balance, and her need to love another is so intense that she welcomes the miraculous resurrection of the dead baby in the shape of Beloved.

Individuals may like it or not; their lives, and under certain circumstances those of their kin as well, are to a large extent determined by the nature of their relationships with the community. Stamp Paid's recollections of Sethe's killing of her baby girl lay the stress on the capital part the community's goodwill or hostility plays in individual destinies. The party given by Baby Suggs certainly explains why the inhabitants of 124 were not warned of the slave catchers' arrival. It explains

> why nobody ran on ahead; why nobody sent a fleet-footed son to cut 'cross a field soon as they saw the four horses in town hitched for watering while the riders asked questions. . . . Nobody warned them, and he'd always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from a long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing — like, well, like meanness — that let them stand aside, or not pay attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news already to the house on Bluestone Road. (157)

Had the community not chosen to be passive, had they come to tell Sethe that some new whitefolks with the "righteous Look" that always announced "the faggot, the whip, the fist, the lie, long before it went public" (157) had just ridden in, the tragedy which wrecked the lives of a whole family might never have occurred.

If the community's indifference or ill will can be destructive, its determination to help can conversely rescue people from their isolation, and even save them from themselves. Stamp Paid seems to embody the conscience of the community. When he hears that, in the dead of winter, Paul D sleeps in the church cellar, he is shocked and hurt that no one should have offered to take him in when he left 124. "What's going on?" the old man indignantly asks Ella, "Since when a blackman come to town have to sleep in a cellar like a dog?" (186) Shortly after, Stamp Paid comes to see Paul D and apologizes in the name of the community: "You pick any house, any house where colored live. In all of Cincinnati. Pick any one and you welcome to stay there" (230).

Not only does Stamp Paid apologize to Paul D, he also comes to tell him that he was in the yard at the moment when Sethe killed her baby girl and to explain to him that she became a murderess out of love for her children. If Stamp Paid felt so uneasy after he had revealed to Paul D what Sethe had done one

sunny day of August 1855, it was partly on account of a belated concern for Denver and Sethe, but above all because the memory of Baby Suggs did not leave his soul at peace. "It was the memory of her and the honor that was her due" (170-71), the narrator comments, that made Stamp Paid swallow his pride and walk into the yard of 124 to visit a house he had not set foot in since Baby Suggs' funeral.

Acting for the sake of his old dead friend, Stamp Paid sets the community into motion by persuading Ella that something must be done for Baby Suggs' kin. Ella in turn convinces the women that Denver and Sethe must be rescued. The circumstances of Sethe's attempted murder of Bodwin strangely recall those which accompanied the killing of her baby daughter almost twenty years earlier; but something essential has changed: the community which was then absent is now represented by the group of thirty women, including Ella, who have walked down Bluestone road to number 124 and who remember Baby Suggs laughing and skipping among them on the night when she gave her big feast. On seeing the yard, the women are carried back into the past and, forgetting the envy and anger that surfaced the next day, only recall the happiness they experienced during the party. At the moment when Sethe, a prey to the anguish and terror sparked off by the emergence of the past into the present, flies towards Bodwin with an ice pick in her hand, she is not alone as she was on the day of "the Misery." Like the chorus in Greek tragedies, thirty women witness the development of events. But their role is not limited to that of passive spectators: they grab Sethe — Ella even hits her in the jaw — after Denver has wrestled her down, thus stopping the desperate mother from murdering a white man, a crime which would have caused her either to be lynched by the Ku Klux Klan or sentenced to death by a white court.

If the community can influence individual destinies in a spectacular way, most of the time it plays a more discreet, though equally effective, part. Characteristically, all the moments of happiness experienced by the characters involve a strong sense of union. Sethe recalls the twenty-eight happy days she spent at 124 before the tragedy which doomed her to eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life broke out. Nothing remarkable happened during that time, these were simply "twenty-eight days of having women friends, a mother-in-law, and all her children together; of being part of a neighborhood; of, in fact, having neighbors at all to call her own" (173).

If after Paul D's arrival at 124, Sethe has a few months of "sunsplashed life" (173), it is of course because the presence of a man in the big house breaks up her solitude, but also because Paul D acts as a link between her and the community. Paul D has just been four days at 124 when he takes Sethe and Denver out, a momentous event in the lives of the two recluses. Because they are seen in his company, the two women who had been ostracized for eighteen years gain a measure of acceptance from the community. At the carnival, Denver notices that

> there was something about him [Paul D] . . . that made the stares of other Negroes kind, gentle, something Denver did not remember seeing in their faces. Several even nodded and smiled at her mother . . .
> Paul D made a few acquaintances; spoke to them about what work he might find. Sethe returned the smiles she got. Denver was swaying with delight. (48-9)

Paul D seems, by the magic of his sole presence, to have brought about Sethe's and her daughter's reconciliation with the community. Hope that life may start anew begins to make its way into Sethe's mind, and as she walks back home in the fading light with Paul D and Denver, three shadows holding hands symbolically lead the way. This sequence stands in sharp contrast to that in which Sethe, Beloved and Denver are shown skating on the frozen creek four days exactly after Paul D's departure from 124. In the first passage happiness goes together with contact with others and the hope of starting a new family life; in the second the three women are symbolically alone on the ice, cut off from the world (the sentence "Nobody saw them falling" recurs again and again 174-175) and their somewhat hysterical laughter suggests a state of nervous tension and unnatural elation which is bound to deteriorate into some kind of neurotic relationship.

By returning to Sethe at the end of the novel, Paul D rescues her from her isolation and the reader is led to believe that, in uniting their solitudes, they will be able to heal their wounds and become integrated into the black community. Without Paul D, Sethe would certainly let herself die in order to be reunited with Beloved in "the timeless place;" without Sethe, Paul D would probably resume his wandering life, unable to settle anywhere for long. Like the prisoners at Alfred, they can only be saved together because each of them needs the other to find his place in the community. With the help of Paul D, Sethe will come in time to realize that she is indeed her "best thing" (273), in other words that motherhood should not destroy selfhood or serve as a substitute for it. Beloved has

vanished like a bad dream, but Sethe is still alive and about to discover her identity as a woman and a member of the community.

Whereas Sethe's salvation is merely suggested, the various stages of Denver's spiritual journey from a neurotic state of alienation to the joy of making contact with others are described in some detail. The first step of this journey consists in Denver's realisation that she must get out of 124 and bring herself to ask for help. A dozen years have elapsed since the seven-year-old girl last went to Lady Jones', a dozen years during which she has not ventured beyond the yard of 124. When, mustering her courage, Denver sets out towards the old woman's house, she is afraid of everything: of the male voices she hears behind her, of white men who might grab her and tie her (245). Denver has been so accustomed to living in complete isolation that she feels embarrassed when Lady Jones tells her that if she needs food all she has to do is say so. "No, no," the girl stammers, rejecting the offer "as though asking for help from strangers was worse than hunger" (248).

Although Denver's first reluctant contacts with the community arise from necessity — she must bring some food home for the inhabitants of 124 have reached the point of starvation — they have a beneficial influence upon her in so far as they lead her towards an awareness of her own self. Lady Jones' calling her 'baby' acts as a catalyst for Sethe's daughter: "She did not know it then, but it was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (248). Some time later when Nelson Lord, smiling at her, says "Take care of yourself, Denver" (252), his words open her mind: "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252).

Asking help from others, accepting food from them, thanking them for their gifts, then looking for a job, Denver takes a road which lies exactly opposite to the one her mother had followed. While Sethe's pride only brought her contempt and hostility from her neighbours, Denver's humility enables her to establish friendly contacts with the community. At the end of the novel, the neurotic girl who sobbed because she feared that Paul D would take her mother away from her has become a responsible and spiritually mature young woman who makes her peace with Paul D whom she no longer regards as an enemy but as the only person likely to help her mother find a meaning to her life. The young man who runs towards Denver while she is talking to Paul D hints that the future may hold at last some happiness in store for her. The traumatised child who dared not leave the secluded world of 124 has gradually opened to others; she will undoubtedly find self-fulfilment some day as a wife and a mother, and there is every reason to

believe that her house will be as welcoming to all members of the community as 124 used to be at the time when Baby Suggs went preaching in the Clearing.

Whatever their differences, there always remains an indissoluble bond between black people: their skin-colour and the fact that they have a common enemy, the Whites, their former masters. But having a common enemy does not guarantee harmony among neighbours for the black community reacts like an individual, easily offended, resentful at the mere hint of a slight, jealous of those whose happiness and/or generosity appear as an insult to the poor and the unlucky. The unforgivable sin is pride: people are willing to help, provided that the person in need of assistance makes the first move and asks for support. Denver quickly wins the sympathy of her neighbours who give her the material and spiritual help they had denied Sethe because she goes towards others, forsaking her pride. If individuals humbly acknowledge their dependence on others, then the community readily accepts them. Denver seems to have established a satisfactory kind of relationship with the black people of Cincinnati: a relationship through which she may hope to achieve self-fulfilment working towards the building up of a tightly-knit community. As for Paul D and Sethe, each of whom has come to an awareness of his or her selfhood with the other's help, the narrator clearly hints that, together, they will be able to reintegrate the community from which they had been alienated for so many years.

Like Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, in which Hester and her daughter Pearl are outcasts, both rejecting and rejected by the community, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* thus underlines the dangers of isolation for the individual's spiritual balance and leads the reader to believe that in the eyes of the contemporary Afro-American novelist, as in those of her white 19th century predecessor, all that isolates damns whereas all that unites saves.