

**FROM CHILD'S PSYCHOLOGY TO PSYCHIATRY.
MAGICAL AND PATHOLOGICAL CASES: TONI MORRISON,
*BELoved***

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Even from the first paragraphs of her well-known novel, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison introduces us in a space that can be characterized as magical, or maybe even beyond what we call "traditional" magic: "124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom".¹ The house, this territory inside which the action is taking place belongs to Sethe, an ex-runaway slave escaped from the plantation where she was working, "Sweet House," more than twenty years ago. Anyway, the theme in itself may seem even a cliché: the influence that Sethe's one-year-old dead baby, lost in the same period of her flight, exerts upon home and family. Nevertheless, this element becomes a complex one even from the beginning, on the one hand because, in spite of choosing a subject that is "magical" in itself, the displacement inside the structure where the fiction's laws are working will be intensified, even at a primary level, by justifying an impossible event. However, on the other hand, Morrison will go deep into some aspects of child's psychology through the introduction into the narrative thread of the third main character, besides Sethe and the one who we know only by the word carved on the tombstone, Beloved, namely her second daughter, Denver.

As we have already said before, from a "technical" point of view, the presence of the character Beloved is an impossible one; the "ghosts" phenomenon or that of the "apparitions" has been studied and examined thoroughly throughout history, analyzed in books – more or less scientific –, discussed in famous psychologists' and psychiatrists' case analyses like Freud or C.G. Jung, for giving only the most well known examples, debated in TV shows and so on for various reasons. But it is obvious that this analysis does not find its place in here. In exchange, what calls our attention in the opening of Morrison's novel is precisely the reference to a "baby ghost", a deceased girl only two years old. Nevertheless, from the thousand and thousand of stories mentioned concerning this type of phenomena, we were not able to find not even one referring to something with the same characteristics as the one encountered in the novel. The theorists of this

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 3.

phenomenon consider that “letting behind” such a young spirit – therefore, from the point of view of the religious doctrine, especially of the Christian one, considered to be “without sin” – is something impossible because these go directly “into the light” (more precisely, into Paradise) after death. Moreover, the specialists in this field establish a precise limit of a child’s “losing the innocence”, a threshold that would be situated around the age of five, coinciding, from a psychological point of view, with the moment when the child starts to achieve self-consciousness. Besides, it has been made a quite clear differentiation between the so-called “ghosts” (the Beloved’s case in this novel) and “apparitions”, this being a theory according to which the ghosts are only images that “reproduce” certain events, actually some “registrations” provoked by the residual energy, therefore being unable to interfere with real space and time. However, it is enough to keep in mind that we are dealing with fiction in here for agreeing that there is no rule that can be applied as far as the potentiality of existence of one character or another is concerned.

For Morrison, of course, the child as a “ghost-character”, as a potential magical case, is more an excuse for rewriting a history, a personal one, this action grouping together more elements which, at first sight, may seem not to relate to each other. Mainly, in this specific case, we are dealing with a “rewritten history” from the perspective of a marginal group, that of the Afro-Americans where Toni Morrison belongs, her infantile prototype coming close, from this perspective, to some of Philip Roth’s characters, from the American Jewish novel, or to those of Amy Tan, from the United States oriental area. In addition, it is obvious that an important branching of the fictional evolution is that regarding the mother-daughter identification, with the explanatory note that the direction is from Beloved towards Sethe. More precisely, we are dealing in here with an inverted pattern, the “powerful” character who establishes the construction being the infantile prototype, interesting to notice in this context may also be the absence of a relation Sethe–Denver or, more colorless, Sethe–Howard–Buglar (the two sons who have run away from home around the age of 13).

Morrison also blends the impossible with the miraculous, dealing both with “strange” things that cannot be explained in rational terms and with that kind of miraculous we often come across in fairy tales, a category described by Tzvetan Todorov as “an event which happens in our world and which seems to be supernatural”, considering also that “in this manner we reach the fantastic thing’s core. In a world which is ours, that we already know, without devils, without sylphs, without vampires, where an event impossible to explain for the laws of the same familiar world takes place. The one who perceives the event must choose between one or two possible solutions: be it an illusion of the senses or a product of the imagination and the laws of the world continue to be what they are, or the event has actually taken place into reality, it is an integrant part of the reality, and in this way reality is governed by laws which we don’t know. Or maybe the devil is only

an illusion, an imaginary being, or maybe it really exists, in the same way as the other beings, with the only difference that it is more difficult to encounter it.”²

In this way Morrison blends the fantastic, which is based mainly on reader's instability, supposing that, in this case, we deal with an “ambiguity of the explanation” with surrealism. Obviously, it is not properly surrealism what interests us in here, but more precisely one of its characteristics referring to the decomposition of reality and its possibility of being recomposed according to some new rules. Another ingredient is that of magical realism through which she inserts a big dose of supernatural into this reality, at the same time dwelling upon as it would be a perfect normal thing, permanently feeling the necessity of rewriting history from this perspective. In the narrative field, we can say that Sethe wants to protect herself from this “malignant” effects of history, a peculiarity however underlined from the first pages of *Beloved*, more precisely in a fragment that deals with the figure of Paul D. Garner, “one of the last men of Sweet Home”. The intrusion of the male element into the domestic space, however, disturbs the setting of the events, *Beloved*'s ghost being chased away for a very short period by Paul D.'s presence. However, this aspect does not mean not continuing, at the same time, its experience on a separate level; the encounter with the past, with the memories, is the one that blocks actually this presence which, on a psychological level, is nothing else than his mother's projection of her unfulfilled desires. This projection phenomenon is the act through which two different personalities are relating one to another and, in this case, the course not only that is reversed, from child towards mother, but it also lacks coherence and continuity. This is a fact suggested at the writing's level first by the fragmented text, similar from multiple perspectives to Faulkner's “stream of consciousness” technique we find, for example, in “The Sound and the Fury” or in Keyes' “Flowers for Algernon”. It is also true that the character is not necessarily a child, but this is, in some manner, more “infantile” in the same way as it happens with *Beloved*, rather a ghost embodied in a baby's body, there too we are able to notice the presence of some children's personalities inside adult's bodies. Moreover, we should also take into consideration, from the same perspective, both the mixture of past references with the present ones, the clear evolution from the narrative mode to the poetic one, and the dichotomy between prose and poetry that could be easily interpreted too at a symbolical level.

From the child's psychology perspective, this projection refers to the fact that “when a child is born, the congruent area between the child and its primary caregiver, normally its mother is large. This large congruent area is normally due to the child's total dependence on the mother in food and protection. As the child ages and starts to become independent, the congruence begins to lessen. The child

² Tzvetan Todorov, *Introducción a la literatura fantástica*, trans. Silvia Delphy (México: Premia Editora de libros, 1981), p. 13.

begins to develop its own desires and wants, and begins to differentiate personality where thought processes do control his or her own behaviors, which allows the congruent area to become smaller. The mother must help to foster the growth of independence. This movement towards independence normally comes from the physical as well as emotional growth of the child. As the child matures and becomes physically independent, movement away from the mother allows the child to gain experience. This helps to supply the child with the cognitive tools necessary for independent thought.”³ It is obvious that inside *Beloved* does not happen the same thing; the maternal link Toni Morrison presents is not, definitely, a unique direction in the novel’s entangled narrative texture but “is a dominant theme which focuses upon... the spiritual and sacred union within the mother and child cosmos.”⁴ Here, this circle which, in theory, should be perfect, between mother and child, is fragmented by the abnormal institution of slavery. As we already know, Sethe is a runaway slave, an individual that tries to escape from a given condition, to revolt against circumstances, and *Beloved* is, in her turn, while still alive, a “baby-slave” who, paradoxically, the evil, the murder liberates, this “evil” demonstrating to be in some way a proof of ethnic identity. In a way the murder may seem a modality of assuming these new characteristics, it is an immoral act but, in the same time, for Sethe it is much more immoral to accept whites’ values without questioning them and without rebelling. For Sethe “the best thing she was, was her children”,⁵ does not raise the problem of a case where the maternal instinct is absent, but on the contrary.

In this novel we are dealing, in exchange with an identity problem – the child’s murder is more a development of the symbol of Afro-American identity seen as a special minority group being “killed” by a white history. Sethe tries, in fact, to free her daughter for being able to recreate her memory in the future. To this main narrative core, a multitude of timeless motives mingle together with various African myths and with elements of the fantastic: the biblical Parable of the Fall, the identity search in the medieval meaning of the term, the initiation rites, the philosophical nature of good and evil, the ambiguity of the Garden and the Serpent symbol. Turning back to the relation mother-daughter in *Beloved*, one can notice that this, at a basic level, is a primary, natural, even animal connection, a detail which places Morrison’s novel into the literary anthropology area. This link is the result of the primordial substance represented by milk as nourishment and as indestructible connection between the creator and his creation, between mother and child: “I had

³ J. Michael West, “Independence and Control. Psychological Implications for Applied Technology”, South Carolina Assistive Technology Programme, University Center for Excellence, Columbia, 2007.

⁴ Michele Mock, “Spitting out the Seed: Ownership of Mother, Child, Breasts, Milk and Voice in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, in *College Literature*, October 1996.

⁵ Morrison (as in note 1), p. 251.

milk,” she said. “I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn’t stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar.”

Now she rolled the dough out with a wooden pin. “Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he’d see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. I told that to the women in the wagon. Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days she wouldn’t have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it.”⁶ The milk metaphor is used in here as an image of maternal love, an abstract feeling that has the capacity of materializing itself but, first of all, it is a symbol of spiritual nourishment. When the two boys rob this precious thing to Sethe, the link between her and Beloved tends to break down, it cannot be sustained any longer, and it falls apart. In addition, we must not ignore the fact there is another general aspect too, which has been disseminated especially through the Middle Ages Christian iconology: that of the mother who is nursing her baby with the milk of truth in opposition with the bad mother who is nursing serpents. Moreover, in this context, it is also relevant Hercules’s myth who, together with the milk stolen from Hera, gained the quality of immortality; the act of nourishing the baby accomplished by the divine Mother is the sign of *adoption* and, as a consequence, of supreme knowledge. Hera nurses Hercules, Saint Bernard is nursed by the Virgin: he becomes thanks to this fact the adoptive *brother* of Christ. The philosopher’s stone is often called The Virgin’s Milk: the milk is in here a nourishment of immortality.”⁷ Precisely in this symbolical meaning, Sethe’s milk transforms in blood through the killing of Beloved. A symbol similar to that of milk, the blood, as a vehicle that gives life is spilled in here, the “nourishing” materializing in death.

Anyway, this symbolism will be underlined when Sethe feeds Denver with her own blood mixed with milk, a maternal love transfer, but also a power transfer in the same time: “Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go. Baby Suggs shook her head. ‘One at a time’, she said and traded the living for the dead, which she carried into the keeping room. When she came back, Sethe was aiming a bloody nipple into the baby’s mouth. Baby Suggs slammed her fist on the table and shouted, ‘Clean up! Clean yourself up!’ They fought then. Like rivals over the heart of the loved, they ought. Each struggling for the nursing child. Baby Suggs lost when he slipped in a red puddle and fell. So Denver took her mother’s

⁶ *Idem*, p. 17.

⁷ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, seventh edition, volume H – PIE (Saint-Etienne: Seghers, w.y.), p. 103–104.

milk right along with the blood of her sister.”⁸ In this way, the link between mother-daughters-sisters is being highlighted even more, through the two primordial symbols that are the milk and the blood. Anyway, in the same symbolical context, at a certain key-moment, the male character, Paul D., will say that her love is “too thick”, like milk itself, and Sethe will defend herself because, in her conception, “thin love ain’t love at all”⁹ – as far as the milk is concerned only the thick, viscous, rich substance, like blood, has the capacity to feed and maintain life.

This relation between the two primordial organic substances is extremely important for the entire novel’s articulation in itself and for this reason precisely we consider necessary to insist a little more on it. In the traditional symbolical literature, for example, blood – generally mixed with water – leaking from Christ’s wounds, an image often recalled in the Grail’s legends, is, above all, “an immortality beverage”, being “a fortiori, the Eucharistic transubstantiation’s case.”¹⁰ In this context, Beloved’s murdering is enriched with the characteristics of a sacrifice, a sacrifice made in honor of her own liberation but also with the purpose of conserving its personal and ethnic memory of history. It is in fact the moment in which its *personal history* becomes simply *history*, on the one hand the one which is communicated between mother and child and, on the other hand, that between a member of the group and the others. In an environment where past, present, and future seem to coexist, the memory has the capacity of turning back, recreating things, or events.

The house preserves the imprints of what has happened in there but Sethe’s body plays the same role: her back constitutes a labyrinth of scars to which she refers as the “chokecherry tree”, a remembrance of the violent actions of the slave owner. It is not a coincidence that “the master” is a teacher whose “words”, carved into Sethe’s flesh, will remain forever, giving birth in this way to a manner of seeing memory as something concrete. From the ex-slave’s point of view, the image that eternally bears on her back, more precisely on her shoulders, as an ever-present burden is a “tree of knowledge”. This chokeberry tree’s image urges us to take into consideration a certain peculiar significance, encountered both in the Native American tradition and in the Afro-American Voodoo practices: the fact that, besides using the fruit of this tree with the purpose of increasing creativity (so, in a way, profoundly related to the action of writing) and to heal the mind, the chokeberry tree’s juice has been used, in old magical recipes, as a substitute for blood. To this Sethe opposes both her creativity seen as “creation through procreation” and the metaphor of maternal milk that we have already mentioned above, with the meaning that Helene Cixous has given to this metaphor when

⁸ Morrison (as in note 1), p. 153.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

¹⁰ Chevalier, Gheerbrant (as in note 7), p. 144–145.

making the difference between male writing and female writing: “She gives birth. With the force of a lioness. Of a plant. Of a cosmogony. Of a woman... And in the wake of the child, a squall of Breath! A longing for text! Confusion! What’s come over her? A child! Paper! Intoxications! I’m brimming over! My breasts are too overflowing! Milk. Ink. Nursing time. And me? I’m hungry, too. The milky taste of ink!”¹¹ In practice, the woman who speaks, asserts Cixous, and who does not reproduce the representational stability of the symbolic order will not speak in a linear manner: feminine writing, as well as this type of discourse, are not objective and they cannot be seen as objects, in this way being canceled the distinctions between text and discourse, between chaos and order and, in our case, between authority and subversion. Consequently, *l’écriture féminine* will use a language that deconstructs in an inherent way, referring implicitly to the subversive dimension of the rational discourse. A rapprochement is obtained, symbolically, through this complex process, a vicinity to the maternal body, to the breast’s image in the direction of a union, of a non-separation.¹² For this reason, Cixous uses the metaphor of the “white ink”, of writing in mother milk, this element of identification being linked to the expression, to the sound, to the song in general as a manner of manifestation which in the case of Toni Morrison’s novel, is translated through the black woman who speaks from the perspective of her race, dance and music being also some sort of discourse that underlines even more profoundly the latent conflict between rational and irrational in the terms of this splitted Ego: “In women’s speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we’ve been permeated by it, retains the power of moving us – that element is the song: the first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. Why this privileged relationship with the voice? Because no woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the drives as does a man. You don’t build walls around yourself, you don’t forego pleasures as ‘wisely’ as he. Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from ‘mother’ (I mean outside her role function: the ‘mother’ as nonname and a source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink.”¹³

Beloved recalls the song that Sethe has created for her children: “I made that song up,” said Sethe. “I made it up and sang it to my children. Nobody knows that song but me and my children”¹⁴ – a transmission of history and culture under the form of fragments of thoughts, glimpses of singsonged conversation but being also, in the same time, the proof that *Beloved* is the murdered baby reborn under a

¹¹ Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, in *Signs*, I (1976), 4, p. 879.

¹² Mary Klages, *Helene Cixous, The Laugh of the Medusa*, 1997.

¹³ Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, in *Critical Theory since 1965*, ed. Adams and Searle (Florida State University Press, 1986), p. 309–320.

¹⁴ Morrison (as in note 1), p. 176.

ghostly form. The relation between mother and daughter is often materialized under the aspect of a song, as it happens in the refrain “Beloved, she’s my daughter. She’s mine”, through this flow of “singed” consciousness being revealed the feeling of complete possession that she has towards her. Playing, Sethe identifies Beloved with a real child and not with the spirit of a deceased person: the magical child (and not simply magical but in some sense, even malignant) plays through the song with the secret purpose to reconquer the space that has been declined previously to her. Both at the factual level of the events, that are developments of time implying various characters, and at the linguistic level, this trait is very well delimited: for example, Sethe, instead of using words as “to remember” and “to forget” uses “to remember” and “to disremember”, demonstrating in this manner that the past lives into the present. Similarly, the act of singing and playing for a being who in fact does not find her place any longer in the 124 space, are assertions of the past referring to a future that does not exist except inside characters’ imagination. This fantasy is awakened by the refrain addressed to Beloved, Sethe trying to assure her that she will be a good mother proving, unconsciously, to justify her murder as an act of love.

Beloved, as a child-character, is definitely a classical magical example. Unlike other cases, she does not place herself either at the positive pole, as it happens, for example, in the case of the Little Prince of Saint-Exupéry, or at the negative one, as it happens with Pearl, Hester Prynne’s daughter from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter”, but she has a neutral charge. It is true that Paul D. identifies her as being malignant; the ghost mirrors, as it happens also with the other characters in the novel, his own repressed emotions allusive to the past, with a personal history that questions permanently everything. He feels the need of labeling it as “bad”, condemning the past because of the terror exerted upon him and especially because of the humiliations, he has been subject to: “ ‘Good God.’ He backed out the door onto the porch. ‘What kind of evil you got in here?’ ” Paul D. says, addressing to Beloved’s apparition. From another point of view, Denver finds herself completely on the other side when she says that the ghost is, alike her, just reproachful, “sad ... not evil.”¹⁵ The third point of view is, obviously, Sethe’s who sees Beloved “not evil, just sad”,¹⁶ offering in this way a complete characterization when she “offers the final pronouncement on the ghost’s character by denying the ghost’s loneliness, as she denies her own, acknowledging instead only the anger that acts as an armour for the sadness that lies beneath it: ‘I don’t know about being lonely... Mad, maybe’ ”.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Lynda Koolish, «To be Loved and Cry Shame»: A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* – Critical Essay, MELUS, 2001.

So, as Morrison herself asserts, “many times good may seem evil and evil may seem good”, increasing through this device the literary text’s ambiguity but also, first of all, the character’s ambiguity in itself who has, alongside the novel, a sinuous, even tortuous evolution interpreting, throughout the childish game, the blood-curdling pattern that Sethe bears on her shoulders. Initially, Beloved is just a murdered child who begins to haunt a house for reappearing, later on, in a physical form apparently from nowhere. She will remain under this form until the moment when Paul D., upset by the control she has gained over the house, chases her away; as a result, Beloved comes back in a much more powerful physical form than the previous one, more real, in order to have the possibility of interacting directly with the other characters. In the beginning, Beloved tries to seduce Paul D., an action that, in reality, is tantamount to his attempt of confronting with his own past. When she calls her name – as the ghost has asked him – the male character accepts, in fact, the intrusion and the inclusion of the past in the present that he is living together with Sethe and her family. From this perspective, Beloved’s presence has also an implication of healing although, precisely in this point, the novel’s atmosphere does not tend to consider her a beneficial spirit. The desire of seducing Paul D. can be seen in two manners: on the one hand, at a primary level, she tries to force him to betray Sethe trying to make past dominate present. On the other hand, when she asks him to give her a child, she asserts the implication she wants to have into the present through an infantile image hidden inside her. In this way it is very clear the fact that Beloved will exist only until the past exists in connection with her mother. The relation between the two characters reaches therefore a normal level – the dependence mother-child and not the other way round –, and justifies Beloved’s instability as a child-character who does not want to be separated again from the one who has given her life.

In her physical form, Beloved will become a real emotional vampire, feeding herself with the love and sufferance of the people around her: “All the patterns derive from the fact that Emotional Vampires see the world differently than other people do. Their perceptions are distorted by their cravings for immature and unattainable goals. They want everybody’s complete and exclusive attention. They expect perfect love that gives but never demands anything in return. They want lives filled with fun and excitement, and to have someone else take care of anything that’s boring or difficult. Vampires look like adults on the outside, but inside, they’re still babies.”¹⁸ Anyway, it is obvious that Beloved shares with the folklore’s traditional vampire more characteristics and one of the strongest proofs in this direction would be the discussion between Ella and Stamp Paid when they say that “people who die bad don’t stay in the ground”;¹⁹ in the same connection, it is also full of significance the

¹⁸ Albert J. Bernstein, *Emotional Vampires: Dealing with People Who Drain You Dry* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), p. 4.

¹⁹ Morrison (as in note 1), p. 188.

moment when Beloved enters in one of 124's rooms and a mirror breaks, this being also a phenomenon associated with the vampire's image.

As far as blood as a symbol inside the literary text is concerned, there are elements in here too that brings Beloved nearer to this type of characters. For example, the scene in which the blood is dripping from the child's cut throat, the unquenchable thirst that Beloved feels when she shows up in a physical form for the first time but also the detail that her teeth were "pretty white points": "I AM BELOVED and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked

some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in if we had more to drink we could make tears we cannot make sweat or morning water so the men without skin bring us theirs one time they bring us sweet rocks to suck we are all trying to leave our bodies behind the man on my face has done it it is hard to make yourself die forever you sleep short and then return in the beginning we could vomit now we do not

now we cannot his teeth are pretty white points someone is trembling I can feel it over here he is fighting hard to leave his body which is a small bird trembling there is no room to tremble so he is not able to die my own dead man is pulled away from my face I miss his pretty white points."²⁰

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 211–212.

In popular tradition, the first vampires have been described as having hundreds of white fangs capable to tear flesh and bones apart in a second. Later on, the vampire stories changed, describing them as having only two sharp fangs through which they were suckling their victims' blood. In addition, in the African folklore we come across many stories in which creatures similar to the vampires from the European tradition appear, with similar characteristics too: in South Africa, for example, Ashanto, members of an ethnic group spread in Ghana, the Ivory Coast and Togo, speak about the so-called *asanbosan*, fantastic creatures which have iron teeth and live in the trees, attacking from above; the Ewe population too, from the South-East of Ghana (Volta Region) refers to *adze*, characters similar to the vampires which have the form of a glow worm being able instead to gain a human form when they are caught. These ones feed themselves with coconut milk, palm oil and blood and hunt especially the children. The tribes from South Africa (especially Poudo, Zulu e Xhosa) imagined a mythological creature named *impundulu* ("the thunder bird") which takes the

In a strange way, only throughout her the other characters are able to leave their past behind, being prepared to deal with future. The homicide may seem in this case also a manner of reconstructing identities, going from the “uplifting” of black character’s conscience caught in the trap in a white society, passing through “evil” as a necessary proof of demonstrating an ethnic identity. *Beloved*’s murdering can be seen not only as a simple infanticide but both as ritual murder, an offering made to the future liberty, and liberatory killing; sending the baby from a slavery world, a **white** universe, in a freedom world, a **black**, dark one). Even at first sight it is obvious that traditional values are turned upside down, especially at a mythical level existing also in here a presupposed religious underground; the essential myths are generally conserved but there are also inversions of their “orthodox” meanings. More precisely, the murder is an immoral act but much more immoral would be accepting the values of a slave oppressive society, as that of the whites. Conserving and defending the self, recovering the self (as it happens with Sethe), losing the childhood (Denver, *Beloved*) are events strongly linked with the violation of precise traditional rules imposed by the society, rules that, in exchange, belong in reality to this oppressive system which will determine too the two major movements towards the direction which articulates the novel in its whole: Sethe’s escape and *Beloved*’s return.

The main character returns not only in order to manipulate and control the others, not for taking revenge as one could believe at first sight, but because she is nourishing herself with their love and attention. *Beloved* controls Sethe through the feeling of guilt, Paul D. throughout seduction techniques, using allusions with sexual coating, and Denver through isolating her from her mother and accelerating the process of her breakdown with childhood. In this context, a very common motif of the American literature shows up, generally considered commonplace after being intensively used by writers as Henry James, Fenimore Cooper or Herman Melville; more precisely the theme of the Fortunate Fall that materializes through the necessity of recovering from a heavenly state of innocence. This is a status of weakness, raising itself to a painful knowledge of the self. With Morrison, this theme will appear in a more dramatic form, similar in some aspects to that of Hawthorne’s “*The Scarlet Letter*”; the consequence is the return to the true community, to the “global” conscience, emphasizing in this case the possibility of discussing, in a peculiar manner, about “black” conscience.

Another biblical allusion has a great symbolical importance for defining the relation between characters and, in their turn, their affinity with the territory in

shape of a black and white bird of the size of a person and which is also a vampire-type creation which often shows up in popular stories as the servant or the parent of a witch or of a wizard, attacking generally their enemies. Anyway, these cases often happen to show up in the real life too, for example, in 2005, a man of South African origin has been condemned for homicide after he has killed a 2 years old baby thinking that he was an *impundulu* incarnation (for other details, see also Matthew Bunson, *The Vampire Encyclopedia*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1993).

which they are developing. Sethe's constant reference to "the three of us", talking about Beloved, Denver and herself, constructs a kind of trinity only that, different from the biblical Holy Trinity we are dealing in here with female instead of male characteristics, with black instead of white. In fact, Morrison uses in a much more sophisticated way this trinity model along the entire path of the novel; first of all at the text level in itself, the book being divided in three parts numbered as such. In exchange, the human trinities, as the one mentioned before, develop too, having, at a primary level, the role of emphasizing the relations between characters but also of highlighting the mentalities that lie behind them. This is a common characteristic testifying that these human relations prove to be unequal: there is always a character who has complete control over the other two who unconditionally obey him. At the base there is not necessarily the biblical example, but, more important, that of the slave who is *forced* to obey his master. In this direction, these human trinities have in the novel the role of demonstrating the fact that the characters, at a psychological level, are in a total dependence status yet, of slavery, of unconditioned submission to a virtual master. Periodically, these trios are broken, the leader's place being taken by another character. The first trinity that can be found exactly at the beginning of the novel is that including Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Denver, with Baby Suggs playing the role of the leader and with Sethe and Denver in secondary positions. Subsequently, Paul D. will take the main role when Baby Suggs dies, constructing a new trinity, much more important than the first one because it represents Family: the Father (Paul D.), the Mother (Sethe) and the Child (Denver). Of course, this fact implies also the idea of home as a real space, representing an image of the universe but also, as Bachelard said, "the inner being, the floors, the cellar, and the attic symbolizing various stages of the soul, the cellar has as a correspondence the unconscious, the attic – spiritual raising". In addition, it is necessary to notice that the house is also a feminine symbol above all, implying the idea of a shelter, of motherhood, of protection. As soon as Beloved becomes the head of this new trinity, there is a return from apparent normality to that game of the past in which home is not a sheltering space any longer, a real one, but a magical territory in a negative sense where the relation between Beloved, Sethe and Denver is transmigrating in another form of continuing the slavery: "You are mine, You are mine, You are mine!"²¹ Beloved says to Sethe at a certain point. Eventually, Beloved will gain complete control over Sethe because of the painful feeling of guilt she is experiencing.

The house in itself, 124, bears the implications of the memories of a repressed past; and in this case, the reference to numbers made by Morrison has the purpose of showing the continuity of slavery's subsequent effects through the actions of the characters who are inhabiting it. The number 124's significance is that of a character in itself, being not only the origin of Beloved's hunting but

²¹ Morrison (as in note 1), p. 216.

representing in fact *Beloved* in various stages of the novel. From a real space, the house, which represents a shelter for the family, together with the ghostly apparition, will be transformed, from an anonymous home, into a magical territory. As soon as 124 becomes "full of baby venom", this place will gain some peculiar traits, linked with the supernatural. For example, when Paul D. enters 124 for the first time, the first thing he comes across is "a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood"²² – that light is in fact the baby-ghost and when he passes across, Paul D. is overwhelmed with a feeling of grief. In the same way, but this time in a much more violent manner than the previous one, it is the excerpt where the baby-ghost grabs the family dog, throwing it against the wall so hard that she plucks its eye out and breaks its legs, provoking convulsions that make the dog swallow its tongue. In this moment, the ghost's physical force is so real that she becomes not only a presence in the house but also an element of extreme violence inside what should be the home of a family: "Furthermore, when the home or the community becomes so hardened that passing from one to the other is difficult, if not impossible, when these spaces lose some of their power as catalysts for larger social transformations, because chattel slavery, colonization, and racism penetrated every moment in U.S. history, there is a sense in which all homes are haunted by violence and trauma. To paraphrase Baby Suggs, there is not a home in the U.S. (and perhaps America proper) not haunted by a 'Negro's grief'. It is Morrison's insistence on this widespread haunting that makes *Beloved* a useful place to investigate the troubled history of domestic spaces. The home is a place where horror becomes embodied, and where sustaining human connections can be found. The very walls and doors of the home can stymie interventions by the community, or facilitate them."²³ In this way, 124, together with *Beloved's* apparition, will be transformed from a community center into an isolated home from the outside and closed from the inside. It is interesting from this perspective the *house's reaction* too; for example, when Paul D. kisses Sethe on the back the floor starts to tremble and the entire house begins to move. When Paul D. asks the ghost to leave, shouting, everything quiets down. *Beloved* needs this magical space in order to be able to concentrate her energy that gives her the capacity to subjugate the others, building the connections that we have mentioned before between the feeling of power and the awareness of freedom.

In fact, these two elements materialize continuously inside the two major registers of the novel: the flight and the return, Sethe and *Beloved*. Therefore, we have the gesture of running away from Sweet Home, an ironical simulacrum of the desired shelter, from where she is chased away by the slavery's ghost and the attempt of returning to freedom as far as the mother is concerned. For the child, there is the escape from childhood through the refusal of growing up in a chained

²² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

²³ Nancy Jesser, "Violence, Home, and Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", in *African American Review*, 22 June 1999.

material body and the return to the maternal body seen as a source of love, as accumulation of meanings by the means of which past, present and future could be clarified. This *return* to the future is both a transformation and a transfiguration – the child is not a child anymore in the proper meaning of the word, but becomes a spirit, an imaginary projection maybe of the infanticide mother. Nevertheless, without this return, without the intrusion of magic, even negative, in the characters' life the act of running away would not gain any meaning, they would be unable to imagine a future different of the past or to shape their new lives in such a manner that these could belong to them for real. The rebels have in this way the possibility of becoming heroes, good can create evil and evil can be seen as good, the characters' sins being, through this intricate process, expiated. The narrative closes with the complete oblivion of Beloved's mysterious apparition and sudden disappearance. This is a sign that the final goal has been attained with the necessity of creating a new set of values, a set of authentic emotional relationships that are strongly linked with the lived experience: "The alternative discourse created in the text by the free black community can be translated to national ideologies. The novel's liberatory potential lies in its embodiment of *mestiza*²⁴ identity and consciousness. Through the concept of rememory, the text calls for a process of decolonization that is communal rather than isolated and individualized. As a *mestiza* text, *Beloved* crosses borders and transgresses boundaries; within the text, Sethe learns to transcend the boundaries between self and the other and, as a whole, the novel forces readers to cross borders through a definition of rememory that signifies collective decolonization. Through Sethe's story of colonization, internalized colonial paradigms, and eventual decolonization in a communal context, Morrison speaks to the need for collective decolonization before the 'national trauma' can reach resolution. Beloved, then, is a 'voice' that, by disrupting the dominant discourse of national history, serves as an alternative ideological model for all descendents of a colonial history."²⁵

²⁴ *Mestiza* – a mixed race woman, especially between a European and a Native American.

²⁵ Mary Jane Suero Elliott, "Postcolonial Experience in a Domestic Context: Commodified Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", Gate Group, The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, 2000.