



**A Religious and Psychological
Approach to Forgiveness
in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

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Introduction

The wounds of centuries of slavery and racial oppression are not easily healed. The narrative of the painful history of the African-Americans, with a certain focus on the women, has been one of the African-American Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's main topics in several novels. In her novel *Beloved* she raises the question whether the most horrible crime can be forgiven and understood in the light of the horrors of slavery and whether it is possible for the individuals to heal and recover from the trauma.¹

The main character of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is the slave woman Sethe and her children, who in 1855, with only ten years left of legal slavery in the United States, manage to escape from their owner on the plantation, ironically named "Sweet Home". When they are discovered by their former master and threatened to be brought back to slavery, Sethe desperately decides to kill herself and her children. Before she is stopped she has killed one of her baby daughters. Even though Sethe is put in prison and in the eye of the law punished for her crime, she manages to save her children and herself from slavery. But Sethe and her surviving children are traumatised by the murder and unable to lead normal lives as functioning individuals.

The black community turns its back on the family and a sad and angry baby ghost starts to haunt their house, 124 Bluestone Road. Sethe's two eldest children run away, frightened both by the ghost and by their mother, whom they for obvious reasons find it hard to trust, and only her youngest daughter Denver stays with her. They live alone and isolated until Paul D, and shortly after him, *Beloved* arrives.

This essay attempts to throw light on how Morrison's novel shows a way to reconciliation and forgiveness from a psychological and religious aspect through the means of Biblical and mythological metaphors. It also investigates how it is probable to see the runaway slave woman Sethe as something more than an individual and what the role of Sethe, and also of *Beloved*, might signify on a symbolic level in the history of the African-Americans.

¹for an individual, but also on a more general level whether the African-Americans as an ethnic group can forgive their wrongdoers.

Morrison and *The Bible*

Morrison's work is full of allusions to *The Bible*. Already on the first page of *Beloved* the reader encounters this hopeful prophetic epigraph from Romans 9:25, which seems to prophesy of a better future for the black slaves:

I will call them my people,
Which were not my people;
and her beloved,
who was not beloved.

Morrison's use of Biblical allusions is, however, ambiguous. In her books *The Bluest Eyes*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* there are, according to Dubin Edelberg, for instance "characters with Biblical names [who seem to] live their namesakes' lives in reverse"(223). In *Beloved*, the character with the Biblical name is Sethe, the feminine form of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve.²

Whether Sethe lives Seth's life in reverse will be discussed later.³ All in all, Dubin Edelberg claims that Morrison seems to say that "the Bible is the wrong book for blacks" (223). The initial epigraph implies that the blacks were not originally God's people. There is also more to support this theory in *Beloved*. Sethe's mother-in-law is a believer and she becomes "an unchurched preacher" (102). She is even called Baby Suggs, holy. But what she preaches in the Clearing is her own gospel: "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure." (103) Her message to the former slaves is "that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine." She tells them that they should love their flesh because "[y]onder they do not love your flesh. They despise it." (103) Her most important message to the former slaves is: "Love your heart." (104)

Other characters show signs of not being true believers. Sethe often prays: "[Denver] saw her mother on knees in prayers, which was not unusual" (35). However, she describes it as if she has given up hope of salvation:

² "Christianity." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. 13-03-2009 <<http://search.eb.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eb/article-67569> and *The Bible* 1 Mos 4:25-27; 5:1-7

³ Further discussed in *The role of Sethe*, The political and religious symbol, page 12

“What were you praying for, Ma’am?”
“Not *for* anything. I don’t pray anymore. I just talk.” (35)

There is no account of Sethe and Denver going to church or reading *The Bible*. Baby Suggs’ words from before the killing of the baby stand in sharp contrast to Sethe’s hopelessness.

The role of Beloved

The interpretation of the character Beloved has fascinated many literary scholars. Rushdy, for example, explains her from a psychological angle when he claims that she is “more than just a character in the novel, though. She is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered to be forgotten; she symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried” (41). There is also a possibility to look at her from a religious point of view and find parallels to Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of mankind and was resurrected. Whatever standpoint chosen, the role of Beloved is a part of a healing process that can be looked upon from different angles.

The reborn daughter

Most critics seem to agree that Beloved is an incarnation of the murdered daughter and there are plenty of evidence of this in the text. Beloved first appears when Paul D, Sethe’s only surviving friend from Sweet Home, has arrived to Sethe’s haunted house and exorcised the baby ghost: “With a table and a loud male voice he had rid 124 of its claim to local fame.” (45) A few days later she appears. “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water” (60) is the introduction that Morrison gives her. Already this implicates that there is something strange and supernatural about her. She can give no account of her past and the only thing she can remember is standing on a bridge, which is an often-used metaphor for the transition between life and death. The water is strongly associated with birth and when Sethe catches sight of Beloved’s face for the first time there is a remarkable resemblance to her giving birth: “Sethe’s bladder filled to capacity” (61), and she comes to think of when her daughter Denver was born: “[T]here was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now” (61). Even if it takes a long time after this for Sethe to recognize Beloved as her lost daughter, the idea of birth should be clear to the reader.

In investigating the similarities to *The Bible* it is noticeable that Jesus was resurrected, while Beloved is both resurrected and reborn.

The emphasis on birth and motherhood is strong in the novel. During her first time in the household Beloved needs just as much nursing as a newborn baby; she is always thirsty, incontinent and sleeping all the time. This brings to mind the escape and the later killed baby, called “already crawling”, who Sethe had sent ahead to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, together with her sons, while she struggled hard to reach to the baby with her then life-giving milk. Beloved seems to be back to claim the tenderness and care she did not get as a child. Nevertheless, it is not Sethe who takes care of Beloved in the beginning but Denver. It takes time for Sethe to realize the true identity of the newcomer.

She is the same age as the killed daughter would have been and she calls herself Beloved, which is the only inscription made on the otherwise nameless baby’s tombstone. Paul D notes that she enunciates the letters of the name very carefully as people “who [cannot] read but have to memorize the letters of their name.” (62) This might imply that she has never heard the name, maybe just read it on the tombstone.

Denver early suspects that Beloved is her sister. She is definitely convinced when she sees the scar on her throat when she helps her undress, which brings to mind Jesus’ disciple Thomas who was not convinced of his Lord’s identity after the resurrection until he had seen the mark of the nails on his hands.⁴ As another proof of her resurrection Beloved gives Denver a tomblike description of the place she comes from:

“What’s it like over there, where you were before? Can you tell me?”
“Dark,” said Beloved.[---] “Hot. Nothing to breathe and no room to move in.” (88)

⁴ “Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will not believe it.” (John 20:24)
“Jesus came and stood among them, saying, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Reach your finger here: see my hands; reach your hand here and put it into my side; be unbelieving no longer, but believe.’” (John 20:27)

The most important details to support the idea that she is an incarnation of the dead baby, and what finally convinces Sethe, is when she sings the lullaby Sethe used to sing to her children:

The click had clicked; things were where they ought to be or poised and ready to glide in. "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." (207)

The question remains whether Morrison gives the reader any other possible and more rational explanation than to share the idea that Beloved is an incarnation of the murdered baby. One other possibility, that Beloved might be "a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek" (277), is suggested by Stamp Paid. The "whiteman" was found dead and the girl was gone. However, this explanation would definitely diminish the interpretative depth of the novel. The how and why of Beloved's existence remain unanswered.

To enable forgiveness

Demetrakopoulos suggests that "Sethe's guilt has recreated Beloved" (56) and this seems to be a psychologically satisfying standpoint. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Rushdy argues in the same line when he claims that "[Beloved] is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered to be forgotten". (41) In Freud's psychoanalysis you have to remember and recreate your past to overcome traumas. "Sethe must 'conjure up' her past – symbolized by Beloved – and confront it as an antagonist", Henderson writes when discussing Freud's theories. She finds that "Sethe must learn to regard her problematic past as an 'enemy worthy of [her] mettle, a piece of [her] personality, which was solid ground for its existence and out of which things of value for [her] future life have to be derived'". (92)⁵ Beloved's presence fulfils these requirements and the relation between her and Sethe can be described as a psychoanalytical process that leads to catharsis and enables Sethe to develop into a functioning individual. The religious metaphors are a way to represent this progress and the forgiveness described in religious terms can be looked upon as the moments of catharsis.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through", *Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol12, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1914) pp146-57

Sethe is burdened by guilt and if Beloved's incarnation is there to forgive Sethe and relieve her from guilt we must consider in what way this can be done. According to Christian beliefs, forgiveness is the way to come to terms with the sense of guilt. Jesus is said to have died for our sins; on the cross he uttered: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."⁶ You must confess your guilt and repent; not until then you can be absolved of your sins. If you do not believe in God and can get his blessing, someone else must be there to forgive you. As stated earlier, Sethe seems to have lost her faith in God. She has born her guilt for a long time. She has served her time in prison; in the eyes of the law, she is forgiven, but the black community has not forgiven her; after eighteen years, she is still excluded and everybody turns their backs on her. Her sons have not forgiven her; they have run away. The baby ghost seems to be there to punish her and ceaselessly remind her of her crime. Sethe constantly lives with her memories and "feels bad" (8), although it is not certain that she actually repents and confesses her guilt. When explaining her behaviour to Paul D, she says: "It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that." (194) When Sethe comes to the conclusion that Beloved is her reborn baby daughter her reaction is relief: "[Sethe] even looked straight at the shed [where the daughter was killed], smiling, smiling at the things she would not have to remember now. Thinking, she ain't even mad with me. Not a bit." (214) What she experiences is that she is forgiven, and what has caused this feeling is that she finally believes in Beloved. The parallel to Jesus can be drawn; if you believe you will be forgiven: "When Jesus saw their faith, he said, 'Man, your sins are forgiven you.'"⁷

Beloved is craving for Sethe's attention and the relationship develops to a *folie à deux*. Beloved wants more and more of Sethe, trying desperately to make up for her lost childhood and Sethe is increasingly obsessed by Beloved. In a long lyrical inner monologue, beginning: "I am Beloved and she is mine" (248), Beloved describes her transition from dead to living and her focus on finding Sethe:

I am not dead I sit the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me doing it at last a hot thing now we can join a hot thing (252)

In a similar lyrical dialogue Sethe's and Beloved's voices seem to melt together:

⁶ Luke 23:24

⁷ Luke 5:20

Tell me the truth. Did you come from the other side?
Yes. I was on the other side.
You came because of me?
Yes.
You rememory me?
Yes. I remember you.
You never forgot me?
Your face is mine.
Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now. (254)

Beloved does not answer these questions directly. Instead she asks where “the men without skin” are, the white men who came to catch them, and Sethe answers that she “stopped them” once and that “[t]hey won’t ever come back.” (254) The paragraph ends with the repeated “You are mine. You are mine. You are mine.” (256) Here, their identities seem to blend. It is possible to continue drawing the parallel to Jesus Christ in this discussion on identification. Christianity is a monotheistic religion, Jesus and God are said to be one and the same, like Beloved and Sethe who merge into one entity.

Beloved takes more and more of Sethe, and finally Sethe gives up her work at the restaurant. She gives everything to Beloved, she makes her dresses, gives her all the sweets she constantly wants. Demetrakopoulos describes Sethe’s total focus on Beloved as a ferocious “remothering”. (56) The thin Beloved grows bigger and bigger and Sethe gets thinner and thinner. Sethe goes to the point of obliterating herself to show her repentance and her wish to be forgiven. Demetrakopoulos depicts their relation as a “psychic incest” (58) and she argues that this binding force between mother and daughter is harmful to the mother’s possibilities to enter community, which is definitely true for Sethe, who at this stage is completely cut off from their society. Their situation is also, according to Demetrakopoulos, representative of maternal love in general as an obstacle to mothers to take their place in both society and, as a result of this, in history. By writing *Beloved*, with its true historical background,⁸ Morrison has contributed to demonstrate the importance of maternal love in the course of history. In the final chapter of the novel she gives a paradoxical comment to the story when she states that: “It was not a story to pass on.” (323) By this statement she proves to the reader that she is fully aware that the traditional view

⁸ The historical background will be further discussed in *The role of Sethe*, The political and religious symbol.

is that a story about maternal love is of no interest to the public and should be kept in the family, but she has already told it and by doing so claimed mothers' – and slaves' – part in history.

At the end, there is nothing left to eat in the house. Denver is forced to take responsibility and venture her way out into society for help. It is by her agency the final encounter is possible. The women of the black society, about thirty of them, come to rescue Sethe from the ghost that has taken flesh. They assemble and are singing on the road outside Sethe's house:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing⁹ had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words.[---] It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (308)

To Sethe this is a sign of forgiveness from the black community. At the same time the white man, Mr Bodwin, Denver's employer, arrives to give her a lift to work. As Sethe is standing in the porch with Beloved and Denver, in her confused state of mind, she is back in the traumatic situation eighteen years ago. To her mind, Mr Bodwin is the slave master coming to catch them. Only, this time she does not attack her children but the white man. She runs towards him with an ice pick in her hand. Fortunately, she is stopped by Denver before Mr Bodwin has come to any harm. At this moment Beloved disappears, never to come back. She has filled her mission. Sethe has paid back and succeeded in doing the morally correct thing as a mother: to attack the attacker and not her own children. By the help of Beloved she is forgiven.

To free from slavery

Beloved's alter ego, the killed baby girl, who is never given a proper name but is called "already crawling", also has an important role in the freeing of the family. Firstly, she is important as a motivator for Sethe to run away from the slave owner: "[Sethe] couldn't let her nor any of them live under the schoolteacher. That was out." (192) Sethe's greatest fear is that her children will be treated as animals as she and the other slaves were under the schoolteacher's control. Secondly, she is the motivator for

⁹ The Clearing was the place where her mother-in-law Baby Suggs used to preach and this was the only place where Sethe ever enjoyed friendship in the black community during her short period of freedom before the killing.

Sethe not to give up during the most difficult parts of the escape, as she has to reach to her baby with her life-giving milk. Thirdly, the baby's death is the sacrifice that gives the rest of the family their freedom. Sethe's act of killing her daughter convinces the slave owner that she is insane; consequently, he does not want any of them back. On a metaphorical level the interpretation could be that she is sacrificed to save her people, like Jesus Christ was sacrificed to save mankind.¹⁰

The resurrected/reborn Beloved's role in freeing the family, or what is left of it, is to make them recognize themselves as individuals and to help them establish their place in society. The experience of slavery involves not only a lack of individual and ethnical history but also, according to Ayer Sitter, are the relationships between oppressed humans injured and distorted by an "internalization of the oppressors' values" which can even subvert the self. Morrison's image for this internalization is in claiming that the unhappiness and violence in the slaves is not due to "the jungle the blacks brought with them" but to "the jungle whitefolks planted in them." (234) Ayer Sitter goes even further in arguing that *Beloved* illustrates "how every natural instinct and emotion is in some way twisted or stunted by the experience of living in a culture that measures individual worth by resale value and the ability to reproduce oneself without cost." (18) The harm slavery did to the slaves' minds and their appreciation of a true self takes a long time to heal and the process can probably not be accomplished in one generation although Morrison points out a way to start.

Beloved takes away the burden of memory from Sethe's shoulders that guilt has laid on her. This in turn, gives Sethe a possibility to plan and to recognize herself as an individual and to think about tomorrow, although not immediately. After the ice pick attack on Mr Bodwin and Beloved's disappearance, Sethe is devastated and exhausted, not leaving her bed for weeks: "Her eyes, fixed on the window, are so expressionless [Paul D] is not sure she will know who he is." (319) She tells Paul D that she has no plan for her future life. In the presence of Paul D her hope returns. He seems to bring back her self-esteem by claiming that they "need some kind of tomorrow" and that "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." (322). Sethe's answer opens up for a new beginning: "Me? Me?" (322).

¹⁰ This will be discussed more elaborately in *The role of Sethe*.

Beloved plays a totally different role in the freeing of Denver. When Beloved more or less devours Sethe, Denver has to take responsibility of the home and step out into society in order to survive and rescue herself, her mother and sister. The responsibility that has been forced on her makes her grow. In the ice pick attack she shows a determination and readiness that save the situation. To Denver, who has spent all her life in the house, isolated, with only her mother and the ghost as company for the last eight years, and before that only Baby Suggs and the brothers, this is a tremendous change. Before Beloved shows up Denver complains: "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls either." (17) In the end she has a job, she visits Lady Jones, the schoolteacher, proves to be a good student and there are suggestions that she might get further education and that she has a boyfriend.

The role of Sethe

In spite of the title of the novel, Sethe is considered to be the main character. To see her as a symbol is more or less compulsory to every attentive reader. In the following, different possible interpretations of her character will be discussed.

The loving mother

Sethe is, most of all, the mother. In her escape from the plantation, motherhood is emphasised as the strongest motivator, and the most obvious questions to the reader of *Beloved* are how a mother can kill her own child and if this act can be explained, and maybe even justified, by the inhuman system of slavery. Sethe's role as a loving mother is the topic of many articles on *Beloved*. Lewis, for instance, argues that: "*Beloved* reflects how in such a society allowing oneself to love is a dangerous practice doomed to heartache." (2) The slaves could not afford to really love anybody. Motherhood and family life were nothing that could be taken for granted; for the slave families were often divided when family members were sold and the female slaves were systematically abused both by other slaves and by the white owners. There are several examples of this in the novel. Sethe's mother was never allowed to be a real mother as her slave owner did not allow her to stay with her daughter to love and

nurse her, and she was hanged when Sethe was just a few years old. Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs gave birth to eight children, with six different fathers, and was only allowed to keep the last one, Halle, who is later the father of Sethe's children and also the one who does extra day's work to buy Baby Suggs her freedom. Baby Suggs once tells Sethe: "All I can remember of [my first-born] is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember." (6) The human rights of having a family and forming and entertaining family bonds were generally taken away from the slaves; anything else was a deviation:

Once in Maryland, [Paul D] met four families of slaves who had all been together for a hundred years: great-grands, grands, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, children.[---]He watched them with awe and envy, and each time he discovered large families of black people he made them identify over and over who each was, what relation, who, in fact, belonged to who.[---] Nothing like that had ever been his. (258)

This affected both the slaves' right to preserve and record their history as families and to form a dream of the future for themselves and their children. All this is what we normally need to form a self. The most important factor to develop a functioning self is, according to most established psychological theories, a mother, or at least a good substitute with lasting bonds.

However, Sethe refuses to yield to the system, and she allows herself to be a loving mother. Already as a child she learns that she is different because she is chosen. Her mother gave birth to many children, but Sethe is her mother's only surviving child: "She threw them all away but you", her mother's friend told her. The reason she let her live was that "[s]he put her arms around [Sethe's father]. The others she did not put her arms around." (74) The other pregnancies were results of rapes but Sethe was, as it seems, born as a result of love. As a young girl, Sethe is described as strong, "the one with iron eyes and backbone to match" (10). She is protected from abuse from the other men on Sweet Home by Mr Garner and allowed to form a family with Halle. As the situation on the farm, after Mr Garner's death and Schoolteacher's arrival, becomes unbearable she has the force to break free and she brings her children to freedom.

When Paul D, who all his life only has allowed himself "[l]oving small and in secret" (260), complains that Sethe's "love is too thick" (193) and that it is dangerous to love

like that, she explains to him that “[l]ove is or love ain’t. Thin love is no love at all.” (194) She also describes what happened to her motherly love in freedom: “Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love.” (190) Apparently, there is a connection between an individual’s potential of feelings and his/her sense of autonomy.¹¹ The insecurity during the enslavement diminishes the self and without a self you cannot love. How the ability to love shrinks when the insecurity increases is witnessed by Paul D as well. The first metaphor for his love on Sweet Home is the big tree called Brother; in the horrible slave camp in Georgia it shrinks to a little sapling and finally he locks all his love away in a “tobacco tin buried in his chest” (86). After having found freedom and starting to build up a new self and claiming the right to love her children, Lewis defines Sethe’s act of killing her daughter as “a refusal to compromise her right to love her own children.” (2) Sethe does not contradict this when she states that she did not have any choice and that she succeeded in what was her job, “to keep them away from what [she knew] is terrible.” (194) She refuses to give up and let go of her loved ones.

Henderson makes the point that “[i]f memory is *materialized* in the reappearance of Beloved it is *maternalized* in Sethe’s (re)configuration” (91). She gives birth to both her future, in the form of the unnamed baby girl, and to her past, in the symbolical birth of Beloved and later keeps on *maternalizing* her past in the compensating mothering of Beloved. Sethe is only a mother and she can see no other meaning to her life. Demetrakopoulos’s point of view is that Morrison in *Beloved* “develops the idea that maternal bonds can stunt or even obviate a woman’s individuation or sense of self.” (51) It is not until Sethe is relieved from the responsibility of her children, and of her child’s death, that she can think of her own self and of being an individual with her own right to exist, being something more than a mother.

The political and religious symbol

Ayer Sitter reports that Morrison repeatedly has asserted that “*Beloved* is the story of a *people* rather than a person” (17). This is supported by the novel’s dedication to

¹¹ Maslow’s hierarchy of needs states that an individual has to satisfy the basic needs – physiological and safety needs – before she can satisfy the higher social needs as friendship, love. (Maslow, Abraham. *A Theory of Human Motivation*. 1943)

“Sixty Million and more”, referring, as Kella explains, to the “Africans who died in the Middle Passage, leaving no records behind them.” (115) Consequently, the interpretation of Sethe’s character as a leader and a precursor of the freeing of the African-American slaves does not seem to be too far-fetched. This can be seen both politically and religiously.

Politically in the novel, the story of Sethe’s infanticide is claimed by Mr Bodwin to “build a further case for abolishing slavery.” (307) Sethe’s escape and the killing of the baby take place in 1855, ten years before the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude.¹² In the foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison relates the background of the novel. Her inspiration came partly from the true story of Margret Garner, who escaped slavery with her children and was arrested for killing one of her children to prevent them from being returned to the slave owner’s plantation. Morrison also describes the political importance of Margret Garner’s case: “She became a cause célèbre in the fight against the Fugitive Slave laws, which mandated the return of the escapees to their owner.” (IX)

On a religious metaphorical level there is evidence that Morrison, as hinted earlier, might have intended Sethe to have a godlike quality. She is given the feminine form of the Biblical name Seth, the son of Adam and Eve, who were created to be like God. He is their third son after Cain and Abel and the one who prospers and becomes the father of mankind¹³. It can be argued that Sethe’s life in many ways is the opposite of her Biblical namesake’s: She loses all her children except one, her position in society is on its lowest strata, she has committed an atrocious crime and lost her faith in God. At the same time it can be argued that Morrison chooses to give her this name to imply that she is more than an ordinary woman; not only does her case provide a strong political argument for the abolition of slavery, but she also sacrifices her own daughter to save the rest of her children from enslavement, which could be a metaphor for freeing her ethnic group. Probably it goes without saying that this must be considered to be a religious allusion to God’s sacrifice of his son Jesus Christ to save mankind and give them everlasting life.

¹² "civil liberty." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. 21 Apr. 2009 <<http://search.eb.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eb/article-9472043>>.

¹³ 1 Mos.4:25-26; 5:1-7

As stated earlier, Sethe is the chosen, an expression generally referring to Jesus Christ. Jesus was also the only surviving boy child when Herod ordered the killing of the infants of Bethlehem, as Sethe is the only child her mother let live.

Another reference to Sethe as a god is the similarity of her and her daughters to the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the symbol of Christian perfect love, which has been pointed out by several critics. The relationship between Sethe, Denver and Beloved, with their “distorted version of love”, could be described as the mother, the daughter and the unholy ghost. Lewis proclaims: “the novel clarifies that it is a depraved society which has caused this irreligious, unholy distortion to human love which has led Sethe to her desperate act of love and violence.” (3) The gender change from Seth to Sethe is in line with Morrison’s earlier writing and can also be depicting the history of black women and in that perspective it seems logical that she gives her female main character divine traits.

The allusion to the Biblical Seth is strengthened by the idea of Sweet Home as some kind of distorted version of Eden. Sweet Home is, as earlier mentioned, the ironic name of the farm where Sethe lived her life in captivity. During the time the plantation was governed by Mr Garner it was a comparatively good place for the slaves. Mr Garner¹⁴ treated them as humans – asked them for advice, called them men, allowed Baby Suggs’s son Halle to work extra to buy her freedom; he did not abuse Sethe, or let the slave men do it, and he let her “marry” Halle and keep her children. Like God created men, so did Mr Garner in Paul D’s reflection: “Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?” (260) It is not until Mr Garner dies and Schoolteacher arrives, and becomes the new master that the slaves’ lives become unbearable and they start planning to escape.

There are other similarities between Sweet Home and Eden, especially considering what happens when knowledge enters the stage. Just as when Eve ate the forbidden fruit, Schoolteacher, with his calculations, notations and measuring strings changes

¹⁴ Are Mr and Mrs Garner of Sweet Home given the name of Margret Garner, whose true story inspired Toni Morrison to *Beloved*, to be seen as a way of honouring Margret Garner?

the place. He takes away all their pride, humiliates them and shows clearly to both Sethe and Paul D that they are nothing more than possessions; their only difference from cattle is that they have no value as meat: “[Paul D] learns his worth. He has always known, or believed he did, his value – as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on a farm - but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis.” (167) Sethe is measured and the pupils are asked to “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal characteristics on the right.” (228) For her, this revelation that her humanity is questioned is one of the strongest motives to escape. Schoolteacher is both the most educated man and the most evil man in the novel. According to Dubin Edelberg, this suggests that “the narrator rejects conventional values: formal education”(223), as well as earlier discussed, *The Bible*.

Sethe’s role during Schoolteacher’s reign is interesting. She helps him in his writing and calculation by making the ink, something that she regrets all her life. When Paul D finds her in bed after the ice pick attack and Beloved’s disappearance, this is one of the things that seems to be troubling her the most: “I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink.” (321) She feels that she is an accomplice in his crime.

In the novel and in the character of Sethe there are traces not only of Christian religion but also of African. Notable is that Seth is the name of an ancient Egyptian god, also called Setekh, Setesh or Set. The description of this Egyptian god in *Encyclopædia Britannica* says that “Seth embodied the necessary and creative element of violence and disorder within the ordered world”¹⁵, which is a description with similarities to the novel’s Sethe, who uses violence to create a necessary change to the white man’s ordered world. Traces of African religion can also be found on Sweet Home both in Paul D’s attitude toward Mr Garner and toward his own situation in life. Although Paul D thinks that Mr Garner is a reasonably good master/(god), he doubts Mr Garner could ever have been the solution for the black man: “What would [Paul D] have been anyway – before Sweet Home – without Garner? In Sixo’s country, or his mother’s?” (260) Sixo is the only of the men on Sweet Home who can

¹⁵ “Seth” Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. 17 Apr. 2009 <<http://search.eb.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eb/article-9066908>>.

speak an African language; he has the darkest skin and has knowledge of traditional African religion. Ayer Sitter even suggests that Sixo's name is meant to bring to mind the "Sixty Million and More" to whom Morrison dedicates her novel. His view of life stands out as the best alternative to Paul D. Ayer Sitter calls him "Paul D's spiritual (ancestral?) guide." (23) For Sixo and in African religion the tree is an important symbol of love, life and knowledge. On Sweet Home, the slaves gather around a big tree, called Brother. The tree is such an important symbol to Paul D that he even compares his innermost feelings to it:

His little love was a tree, of course, but not like Brother – old, wide and beckoning.
In Alfred, Georgia¹⁶, there was an aspen too young to call sapling. Just a shoot no taller than his waist. The kind of thing a man would cut to whip his horse. (260)

Ayer Sitter asserts that "[f]requently in [Morrison's] later works, positive values are associated with specific practices of West African culture: naming traditions, ancestor worship, acceptance of the supernatural, harmony with nature, and the linking of individual wholeness to rootedness in a community." (19) The tree symbol is also a link to Sethe. She is the carrier of the symbolic tree. The scars on her back, from the whipping she was punished with when trying to escape, are shaped like a tree. At least this is how Amy Denver, the white girl, who helped her to deliver her baby during the escape, describes it:

"It's a tree [-]. A chokeberry tree. See here's the trunk – it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom." (93)

This is both a symbol of Sethe's martyrdom and of her important position for the slaves. Dubin Edelberg claims that the tree is a strong symbol to Morrison. She gives several examples of important tree symbols in Morrison's other novels and she also comes to the conclusion that "Morrison posits a kind of primitivism as an answer" (236). To Paul D, the memory of the big tree Brother on Sweet Home, and the little sapling in Georgia are strong symbols, almost to be considered as deities. At first, he finds it hard to recognize the tree on Sethe's back:

¹⁶ In Georgia, Paul D was kept in chains in a slave camp under horrible conditions.

And the wrought-iron maze [---] was in fact a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back when he took the midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home. (25)

In the end, he seems to acknowledge the tree when “he is thinking about her iron-wrought back” and he decides to finally settle down “to put his story next to hers.” (322) Just as he once found shelter and hope in the god-like trees on Sweet Home and elsewhere, he now appears to accept Sethe as someone you can be near and trust and talk to if you want. Like the trees earlier in his life have been the representatives of his African-rooted primitive religion this role is now taken over by Sethe, the woman who carries the tree on her back.

At the same time the tree can just as well be an allusion to the Biblical Tree of Life.¹⁷ Coonradt points out that the tree is described by Amy Denver, a white girl who has also escaped from a situation similar to slavery. She is an indentured slave¹⁸ and shares Sethe’s experience of abuse, starvation and escape. Coonradt argues that Amy is the positive “*bridge* between black and white” (169), because she is the only white person in the novel who is without any racism. Her assistance in Sethe’s birth during the escape gives hope to a union between black and white. The baby Denver is later named after Amy and thereby becoming the carrier of this hope for racial unity. “The leaves of the tree of life serve for the healing of nations” (Rev 22:2) could well be used as a metaphor for healing the racial differences and conflicts. In order to ease Sethe’s pain Amy drapes spider webs on her bleeding back “saying it was like stringing a tree for Christmas.” (94) Coonradt cites Page, who suggests that this is “a reference to celebrating Christ’s birth, the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy.” (178)

With this multitude of allusions to both *The Bible* and to African religion Morrison seems to suggest that Sethe contributes to merge Christian and African values and religion. Her way to freedom and forgiveness is a symbolic way for the African-Americans to find a home in their new country. The ambiguity toward the new country that has been forced on them and the longing to be incorporated is expressed

¹⁷ Revelations 22:2: “On either side of the river stood a tree of life, which yields twelve crops of fruit, one for each month of the year. The leaves of the tree serve for the healing of nations, and every accursed thing shall disappear.”

¹⁸ Indentured slavery was also called involuntary servitude and was abolished in 1865 in the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution together with slavery

in these words: “[Paul D] could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his [---] and he tried hard not to love it.” (316) If Sethe can be forgiven, all black people who committed atrocious crimes under the pressure of slavery, can be forgiven and, like Paul D and Sethe, find hope “for some kind of tomorrow.” (322)

Love as the solution

Love has been brought up to discussion on several occasions earlier in this essay and considering that the subject is the novel titled *Beloved*, love must finally be put forward and discussed as the main topic.

Sethe’s power and longing to love originates in her conception; she is a survivor and stronger than other women because she is a result of love. Her mother chooses and loves the man who fathers Sethe, something that was an exception for the slave women. Sethe herself loves the father of her children. Her attitude that love cannot be “too thick” and that “[t]hin love is no love at all” (194) is the reason she and her children could avoid being sent back to slavery. Her killing of the baby was an act of love, in her eyes. About the potent baby ghost Sethe says that it was “[n]o more powerful than the way I loved her” (5). Moreover, Baby Suggs’s sermons about love have earlier been brought up and discussed. However, it should once more be pointed out that what was important to her was that they should love themselves.

Beloved’s craving for motherly love has also been pointed out. What has not already been discussed, is her name. *Beloved* is both the name of the character and of the novel, which must be of some significance to the reading and interpretation. Coonradt concentrates on the role of Amy Denver and reveals the meaning of the name Amy – the French Aimé – which is the Latin equivalent of *Beloved*. If *Beloved* is the black saviour, she is the white, and together they build a bridge of love between black and white. Amy gives hope to Sethe in her difficult escape; without Amy’s help and comfort it would have been impossible for Sethe to succeed and gain freedom. This bridge could also be considered to be Denver, whose name, coincidence or not, means

“ford or passage used by the Danes”¹⁹. According to Coonradt, the message of the whole novel is to “be loved”: “The fulfilment of this promise [given in the epigraph²⁰] lies in bridging the gulf of racism that still exists between blacks and whites. Perhaps only then can all people, regardless of race, *be loved* and healed.” (169)

That *The Bible* is considered by Morrison to be “the wrong book for blacks” (Dubin Edelberg 223) has been one of the starting points for the analysis. Even if this is Morrison’s dominating standpoint, there seems to be evidence in *Beloved* that she at least finds some good traits in the Christian gospel. The way she uses her Biblical metaphors suggests that she, in that case, prefers the New Testament’s loving God to the Old Testament’s more severe and punishing God. The allusions to the Old Testament are from Genesis, and as far as it has been proved in this essay, they all relate to the time before the escape, the hard times of slavery when the blacks “were not [God’s] people”, according to the initial epigraph. The epigraph from the New Testament, also giving the title, promises love to be the solution: “I will call [---] her beloved, who was not beloved.” The words are from “The Letter of Paul to the Romans” (9:25). Not only *Beloved* is the link from the epigraph to the story, it might be suggested to be Paul D, who finally shows Sethe love, which enables Sethe to tell him the story:

Perhaps it was the smile, or maybe the ever-ready love she saw in his eyes – easy and upfront, the way colts, evangelists and children look at you: with love you don’t have to deserve – that made her go ahead and tell him what she had not told Baby Suggs, the only person she felt obliged to explain anything to. (190)

In the above quotation there is an open allusion to the Biblical Paul in the word “evangelist”. Just like the names of Sethe, *Beloved* and Denver, it is no coincidence that Paul carries his name. Consequently it is also his love that brings him to her at the end after the ice pick attack. He compares what he feels for Sethe with how his “spiritual guide” Sixo described his love for the Thirty-Mile Woman:

“She is a friend of my mind. She gathers me, man. The pieces I am, she gathers them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.” (321)

¹⁹“Denver” [Online Etymology Dictionary](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Denver). 2001. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. 13 May 2009. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Denver>

²⁰ I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, who was not beloved. (Rom 9:25)

That he returns to Sethe to “put his story next to hers” and to build “some kind of tomorrow” (322) is the proof of love Sethe needs to go on.

Conclusion

Beloved can be interpreted from a psychological or religious angle and both can provide satisfying explanations to the role of Beloved and to how Sethe can be reconciled and forgiven. In *Beloved*, Morrison creates the reincarnation of the killed daughter in the form of Beloved to make it possible for Sethe to come to terms with her past and develop into a functioning individual. Morrison’s Biblical and mythological metaphors are complex and distorted and she often changes the traditional male images to feminist-focused versions, which seem to provide an alternative that is better suited for the African-Americans, and in particular the for the women.

The novel points out love as the solution to overcome Sethe’s trauma of killing her daughter and her wounds of slavery. The love and acceptance of Paul D and the assistance of the white indentured servant Amy Denver are other representations of love that are crucial to Sethe’s possibilities to become a whole individual. Love can also be regarded as the cure to heal the post-slavery racial conflicts. Sethe and Beloved are also to be regarded as symbolic representations and rescuers of the African-Americans from the wounds of slavery.

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