

Beloved

by Toni Morrison

StoryLines Midwest Discussion Guide No. 3

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About the author

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931. A voracious reader as a child, Morrison took degrees from Howard University and Cornell and began a distinguished teaching career that led her from Texas Southern University to Yale, Bard, and Princeton. For many years, until 1987, Morrison worked as a senior editor at Random House. In addition to the Nobel Prize (1993) and Pulitzer (1998), Morrison has received a variety of other literary awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Discussion questions

In *Black Women Writers at Work*, Toni Morrison says: "I am from the Midwest so I have a special affection for it. My beginnings are always there. . . . No matter what I write, I begin there. . . . It's the matrix for me." How does the novel's setting—both in place and time—affect its success? How does Morrison's vision of the Midwest differ from that found in the works of other writers in the StoryLines series? Why?

Authors often struggle with the problem of how to treat great historical or political issues—war, genocide, the fall of civilizations, etc. The material can easily overpower the art, or the argument can become too starkly one-sided. What strategy has Toni Morrison used to illuminate slavery in *Beloved*, and how effective is this choice?

The Midwest was seen as a "zone of freedom" by slaves escaping the South in the mid-19th-century. How do you think the Midwest is seen today by those outside it?

What happens to a culture when the continuity of family life is broken or denied? Are there areas of the Midwest where the continuity of culture is being broken today? Or where it is not being broken or has evolved?

Additional readings

Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*, 1969.

Sula, 1973.

The Song of Solomon, 1977.

Tar Baby, 1981.

Jazz, 1992.

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, 1992.

Paradise, 1998.

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Boundaries or edges tend to be potent places in fiction—places of change and redefinition. The settings of Toni Morrison's powerful *Beloved*—rural Kentucky and the Ohio River city of Cincinnati—offer us a view of the mid-19th-century Midwest at one of its major borders. It's not the Midwest as "heartland," but as a zone of freedom to be crossed into and embraced.

In this, her fifth novel, Morrison turns to one of the oldest literary forms, the ghost story. The year is 1873, the place, 124 Bluestone Road, on the outskirts of Cincinnati—across the Ohio River from the former slave-holding state of Kentucky. Sethe, the main character, is marooned in this house with her 18-year-old daughter, Denver. Also present is the fitful spirit of Sethe's unnamed daughter, whose grave marker reads simply, "Beloved." It's "a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut." Though there's an active black community here, Sethe is deeply estranged from it. As the novel opens, she is visited by Paul D, "the last of the Sweet Home men." They have not seen one another in 18 years.

Its name steeped in irony, "Sweet Home" was the Kentucky farm where Sethe, her husband Halle, Paul D, and a handful of other slaves had once lived. The owners, a couple named Garner, had run the farm with relative benevolence, but upon Mr. Garner's death, his brother had taken charge, and terror descended on Sweet Home.

Now, at Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Paul D and Sethe resume their acquaintance. The spirit of the house responds by throwing one of its "fits." Sethe has always tolerated this haunting, and Denver, in her loneliness, has secretly cherished the presence of her "sister-girl." But Paul D lashes out. "She got enough without you," he hollers. "She got enough!" The spirit departs. In the quiet aftermath, Sethe and Paul D become lovers, and entertain the possibility of making a life together.

Soon, however, Paul D learns that Sethe was to blame for her daughter's death, and he retreats from the house. At this point, Denver and Sethe are visited by a strangely pastless, strangely knowing young woman calling herself Beloved—she has, it seems, walked out of the river fully dressed. The reader suspects, as Sethe later does, that Beloved is the newly incarnated spirit Paul D drove off. Though the household warms to her at first, Beloved will turn sinister, seeking reparations, nearly killing each of the principal characters before she is purged once and for all.

Toni Morrison's storytelling seldom travels a straight path. As events move ahead, fragments of evidence accumulate, the point of view darts between characters, the narrative spirals backward toward difficult truths. What happened at Sweet Home? What became of Sethe's husband? What could compel a woman to kill her child?

Adding to this rich texture is Morrison's voice—vividly lyrical yet clear-eyed and particular, cut with the cadences of black speech, reverie and comedy coexisting with dead seriousness. Storytelling is itself a recurring motif in the novel. Before Beloved's arrival in the flesh, Sethe finds her own history unbearable—"every mention of her past life hurt." Yet now she begins to open up. Here she tells Beloved about the crystal earrings given her by Mrs. Garner:

That lady I worked for in Kentucky gave them to me when I got married. What they called married back there and back then. I guess she saw how bad I felt when I found out there wasn't going to be no ceremony, no preacher. Nothing. I thought there should be something—something to say it was right and true. I didn't want it to be just me moving over a bit of pallet of corn husks. Or just me bringing my night bucket into his cabin. I thought there should be some ceremony. Dancing maybe.

The settings of *Beloved* were the result of Morrison's research for an earlier project, in which she uncovered a clipping about Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave who escaped to Ohio via the Underground Railroad. When threatened with capture, Garner had tried to kill herself and her children, rather than return to slavery. One child died, the others were badly injured; Garner was jailed. These events, re-imagined, became the backbone of *Beloved*, to which Morrison overlaid the supernatural.

It seems fitting that Morrison should choose the image of "haunting" to illuminate slavery's legacy. As a character says, "People who die bad don't stay in the ground." Can a horrific past be forgotten? Should it be? *Beloved* is saturated with images of remembering and forgetting, appearance and disappearance. What happens to a culture when the continuity of family life is broken or denied? Is attachment, or love, possible in the wake of such trauma?

Novelist Margaret Atwood writes that Morrison presents American slavery "as it was lived by those who were its objects of exchange, both at its best—which wasn't very good—and at its worst, which was as bad as can be imagined. . . . Above all, it is seen as one of the most viciously antifamily institutions human beings ever devised. The slaves are motherless, fatherless, deprived of their mates, their children, their kin. It is a world in which people suddenly vanish and are never seen again, not through accident or covert operation or terrorism, but as matter of everyday legal policy."

On its publication in 1987, *Beloved* was called "a milestone in the chronicling of the black experience in America" (*Publishers Weekly*), and a "lasting achievement [that] transforms the sorrows of history into the luminous truth of art" (*Christian Science Monitor*). Reviewer John Leonard (*Los Angeles Times Book Review*) claimed the novel "belongs on the highest shelf

of American literature, even if half a dozen canonized white boys have to be elbowed off. . . . Without *Beloved* our imagination of the nation's self has a hole in it big enough to die from." *Beloved* won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and in 1993 Morrison became the eighth woman and the first black American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Throughout her seven novels, her scholarly writings, and her work as literary editor, Morrison has passionately defended language as a vibrant, living force. "Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names," she said in her Nobel Acceptance speech. Speaking and writing clearly, she went on to say, "is sublime . . . it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference—the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."