

‘Black Women’s experiences, and in particular the meanings they attach to motherhood, are central concerns in *Beloved*.’ How far do you agree?

In Morrison’s novel *Beloved* the experiences of black women are greatly discussed. As we delve deeper into these experiences the idea of ‘rememory’ becomes apparent. This is an idea put forward by Morrison that describes how a memory is revisited by a person bringing them back to the state of mind they were experiencing at that time. This method of Morrison’s is used to describe the pain and suffering that most of the black women have suffered. Morrison explores this concept of rememory with great detail as she adds physical scars, such as Sethe’s ‘chokecherry tree’, which make it impossible for the women to ignore their past experiences.

The woman that Morrison pays the most attention to is Sethe. She has suffered much and we can see it in not only her mental state but her physical state as well. Morrison describes the severe beatings Sethe suffered and the pain and torment inflicted upon her by Schoolteacher and his nephews. Sethe has horrendous scars to show for a particular occasion when Schoolteacher told his nephews to ‘open up’ her back. Sethe is unaware of the scars until Amy Denver sees them and is shocked by the extent of the scars. She says to Sethe “that’s what it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry trees”. Morrison turns this into an ironic image as she begins to describe the beauty of the tree even though the memory of the event from which it came is very ugly. Morrison continues to use this type of language throughout the novel, and even though the language is simple, it gives a depth that allows the reader to experience how the characters feel. Morrison’s descriptions are not elaborate or exaggerated, but are honest and real.

Sethe’s discontent is so powerful that it shapes the way she lives and views the rest of humanity. Her past experiences have strengthened her misery and disability to forget what she has been through. Because of all that Sethe has experienced she becomes a determined and protective mother. She refuses to let her children become the ‘property’ of anybody the way she was owned by Schoolteacher. When Schoolteacher comes to Cincinnati to ‘reclaim’ Sethe and her children, her love for them is so ‘thick’

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that she would rather they were dead than have to be faced with the horrors she was the victim of. Morrison writes this scene from one of the white slave hunters' points of view. Morrison writes 'two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of the nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels with the other.' As this is from a white person's point of view it adds to the poignancy of the experience.

This scene shows the frame of mind of a desperate mother trying to protect her children from a horrific life. After this incident Sethe loses all the support from the community in which she lives. They look at her differently, as though her love for her children brought her to madness. Even those that are close to her find it hard to accept what she tried to do, Paul D says to her 'What you did was wrong, Sethe... there could have been a way. Some other way'. Sethe pays for her actions as she loses her children gradually anyway. Because of the ghost of one of her children in the home, her two sons, Howard and Buglar, run away. She greatly misses her children but she has to learn to live with what she did as it still plays on her mind. At the time, Sethe was just acting as a protective mother but she is paying for the 'thick' love she has for them.

Baby Suggs was another woman who experiences losing her children. She lost all but one of her children when they were young, but then lost her son when he was a victim of slavery. Baby Suggs takes care of Sethe and of Sethe's children because she has no children left of her own and she is, therefore, a wounded mother. She is also protective of all of them and so when she dies, Sethe and Denver find it very hard to deal with.

Beloved's return gives Sethe a chance to 'lay it all down'. This strange and uncultured woman arrives at the house, 'A fully dressed woman walked out of the water'. Her appearance mystifies Sethe, as her skin is smooth and obviously not that of an ex-slave. Although Beloved is called a 'woman' her skin is as smooth as a baby's. Morrison describes it as 'new skin, lineless and smooth'. There are many characteristics of Beloved that are child-like. She has a sweet tooth just as a child does and her use of language is naïve as well, for example: "Your woman she never fix up

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your hair?” Beloved’s sweet tooth is just like that of a child’s as she ‘ gnawed on a cane stick to flax and kept the strings in her mouth long after the syrup had been sucked away’. At the time in which Morrison set this novel, and in the black culture, a belief in reincarnation was deemed completely acceptable. Paul D had removed the ghost from the house, and then the woman appears at 124 with the same name as Sethe’s late daughter. It is obvious to the reader that Denver knows exactly who Beloved is and her presence is more welcome than not.

Sethe becomes once again like a mother, as she is fascinated by and infatuated with Beloved. Her world outside of 124 does not seem to matter to her anymore now that Beloved has ‘returned’ to her. She says, “Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is in this room. This here’s all there is and all there needs to be.” Beloved has completely turned Sethe and Denver’s lives around. Denver cherishes Beloved’s company and does not seem to mind anymore that she knew nobody outside of those that came to 124. Beloved opens up to Denver and tells her about the ‘dark place’ that had so little room that Beloved is ‘down on her side and curled up’. Besides this we find out very little about why Beloved is there and where she has come from. This is ironic as she is able to forget the past unlike Sethe who is forced to hold on to hers. Beloved has no recollection of how she came to be at 124 whereas Sethe’s past has made such a dramatic impact on her.

Morrison’s novel not only describes what the black women have been through but also how the effects of these events have made such a huge impact on them and how they are going to live the rest of their lives. Sethe’s own experience led her to violence and murder, and even though she did it for, what she felt to be, her children’s own good, the incident haunts her every day until Beloved comes back to her. Morrison gives very powerful descriptions of how much Sethe and other black women have suffered. She also describes the importance of motherhood, and how a mother needs her children as much as children rely and depend on their mother. Losing a child can be the most horrific thing that a mother could ever experience and Morrison attacks this loss in a way that is dramatic and powerful.